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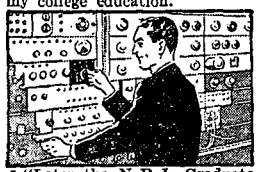

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Vol. 111 OCTOBER, 1941 No. 4

Complete Book-Length Novel

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Jason Croft, as a disembodied spirit, invisible yet seeing, dared to venture across millions of miles of space, to a world strange and beautiful beyond all dreaming

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THE COLOUR OUT OF SPACE.....**H. P. Lovecraft** 98

A horror past men's understanding lurked in the dark New England valley and all life withered before its creeping stain of evil

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The December Issue Will Be On Sale October 10

A **RED STAR** *Magazine*

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.

WILLIAM T. DEWART, President & Treasurer **WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., Secretary**

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE, 111 Rue Réaumur

LONDON: THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD., 3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4

Copyright, 1941, by Frank A. Munsey Company.

Published bi-monthly. Single copies 15 cents. In Canada 20c. By the year 75c; in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; Canada, $1.00. Other countries, $1.20. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Reentered as second class matter March 30, 1940, at the post office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Printed in U.S.A.

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Palos of the Dog Star Pack

By J. U. GIESY

A Complete Novel

CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE STORM

IT WAS a miserable night which brought me first in touch with Jason Croft. There was a rain and enough wind to send it in gusty dashes against the windows. It was the sort of a night when I always felt glad to cast off coat and shoes, don a robe and slippers, and sit down with the curtains drawn, a lighted pipe, and the soft glow of a lamp falling across the pages of my book. I am, I admit, always strangely susceptible to the shut-in sense of comfort afforded by a pipe, the steady yellow of a light, and the magic of printed lines at a time of elemental turmoil and stress.

It was with a feeling little short of

Rolling irresistibly forward, the armored tanks spat out destruction upon the terrified Zollarians of Palos' world

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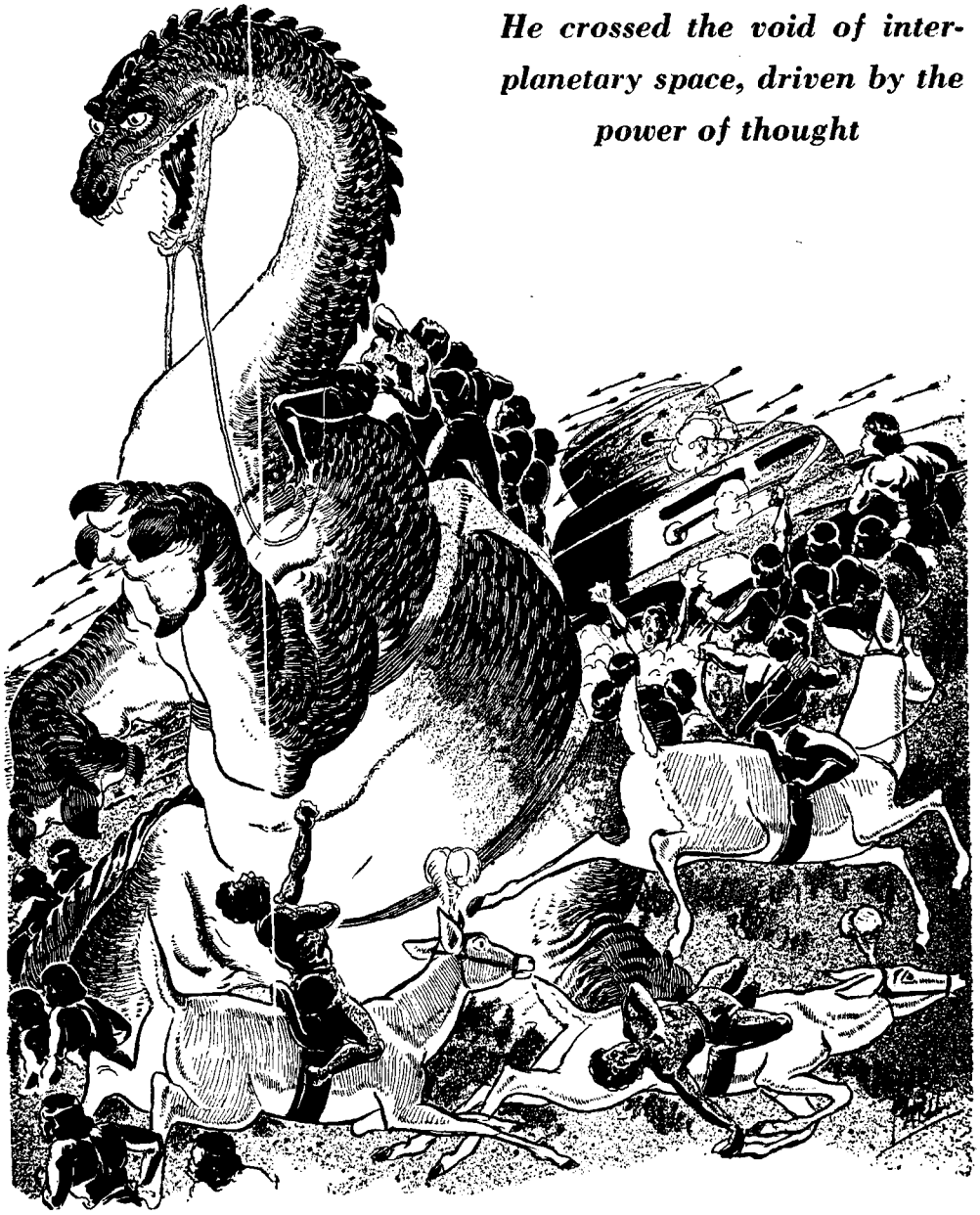
He crossed the void of interplanetary space, driven by the power of thought



positive annoyance that I heard the door-bell ring. Indeed, I confess, I was tempted to ignore it altogether at first. But as it rang again, and was followed by a rapid tattoo of rapping, as of fists pounded against the door itself, I rose, laid aside my book, and stepped into the hall.

First switching on a porch-light, I opened the outer door, to reveal the figure of an old woman, somewhat stooping, her head covered by a shawl, which sloped wetly from her head to either shoulder, and was caught and held beneath her chin by one bony hand.

"Doctor," she began in a tone of almost frantic excitement. "Dr. Murray —come quick!"

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Perhaps I may as well introduce myself here as anywhere else. I am Dr. George Murray, still, as at the time of which I write, in charge of the State Mental Hospital in a Western State. The institution was not then very large, and since taking my position at the head of its staff I had found myself with considerable time for my study along the lines of human psychology and the various powers and aberrations of the mind.

Also, I may as well confess, as a first step toward a better understanding of my part in what followed, that for years before coming to the asylum I had delved more or less deeply into such studies, seeking to learn what I might concerning both the normal and the abnormal manifestations of mental force.

There is good reading and highly entertaining, I assure you, in the various philosophies dealing with life, religion, and the several beliefs regarding the soul of man. I was therefore fairly conversant not only with the Occidental creeds, but with those of the Oriental races as well. And I knew that certain of the Eastern sects had advanced in their knowledge far beyond our Western world. I had even endeavored to make their knowledge mine, so far as I could, in certain lines at least, and had from time to time applied some of that knowledge to the treatment of cases in the institution of which I was the head.

But I was not thinking of anything like that as I looked at the shawl-wrapped face of the little bent woman, wrinkled and wry enough to have been a very part of the storm which beat about her and blew back the skirts of my lounging-robe and chilled my ankles. I lived in a residence detached from the asylum buildings proper, but none the less a part of the institution; and, as a matter of fact, my sole thought was a feeling of surprise that any one should have come here to find me, and despite the woman's manifest state of anxiety and haste, a decided reluctance to go with her quickly or otherwise on such a night.

I rather temporized: "But, my dear woman, surely there are other doctors for you to call. I am really not in general practice. I am connected with the asylum—"

"And that is the very reason I always said I would come for you if anything happened to Mr. Jason," she cut in.

"Whom?" I inquired, interested in spite of myself at this plainly premeditated demand for my service.

"Mr. Jason Croft, sir," she returned. "He's dead maybe—I dunno. But he's been that way for a week."

"Dead?" I exclaimed in almost an involuntary fashion, startled by her words.

"Dead, or asleep. I don't know which."

Clearly there was something here I wasn't getting into fully, and my interest aroused. The whole affair seemed to be taking on an atmosphere of the peculiar, and it was equally clear that the gusty doorway was no place to talk. "Come in," I said. "What is your name?"

"Goss," said she, without making any move to enter. "I'm housekeeper for Mr. Jason, but I'll not be comin' in unless you say you'll go."

"Then come in without any more delay," I replied, making up my mind. I knew Croft in a way—by sight at least. He was a big fellow with light hair and a splendid physique, who had been pointed out to me shortly after my arrival. Once I had even got close enough to the man to look into his eyes. They were gray, and held a peculiar something in their gaze which had arrested my attention at once. Jason Croft had the eyes of a mystic—of a student of those very things I myself had studied more or less.

They were the eyes of one who saw deeper than the mere objective surface of life, and the old woman's words at the last had waked up my interest in no uncertain degree. I had decided I would go with her to Croft's house, which was not very far down the street, and see, if I might, for myself just what had occurred to send her rushing to me through the night.

I gave her a seat, said I would get on my shoes and coat, and went back into the room I had left some moments before. There I dressed quickly for my venture into the storm, adding a raincoat to my other attire, and was back in the hall inside five minutes at most.

WE SET out at once, emerging into the wind-driven rain, my long raincoat flapping about my legs and the little old woman tottering along at my side. And what with the rain, the wind, and the unexpected summons, I found myself in a rather strange frame of mind. The whole thing seemed more like some story I had read than a happening of real life, particularly so as my companion kept pace with me and uttered no sound save at times a rather rasping

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sort of breath. The whole thing became an almost eery experience as we hastened down the storm-swept street.

Then we turned in at a gate and went up toward the large house I knew to be Croft's, and the little old woman unlocked a heavy front door and led me into a hall. It was a most unusual hall, too, its walls draped with rare tapestries and rugs, its floor covered with other rugs such as I had never seen outside private collections, lighted by a hammered brass lantern through the pierced sides of which the rays of an electric light shone forth.

Across the hall she scuttered, still in evident haste, and flung open a door to permit me to enter a room which was plainly a study. It was lined with cases of books, furnished richly yet plainly with chairs, a heavy desk, and a broad couch, on which I saw in one swift glance the stretched-out body of Croft himself.

He lay wholly relaxed, like one sunk in heavy sleep, his eyelids closed, his arms and hands dropped limply at his sides, but with no visible sign of respiration animating his deep full chest.

Toward him the little woman gestured with a hand, and stood watching, still with her wet shawl about her head and shoulders, while I approached and bent over the man.

I touched his face and found it cold. My fingers sought his pulse and failed to find it at all. But his body was limp as I lifted an arm and dropped it. There was no rigor, yet there was no evidence of decay, such as must follow once rigor has passed away. I had brought instruments with me as a matter of course. I took them from my pocket and listened for some sound from the heart. I thought I found the barest flutter, but I wasn't sure. I tested the tension of the eyeball under the closed lids and found it firm. I straightened and turned to face the little old woman.

"Dead, sir?" she asked in a sibilant whisper. Her eyes were wide in their sockets. They stared into mine.

I shook my head. "He doesn't appear to be dead," I replied. "See here, Mrs. Goss, what did you mean by saying he ought to have been back three days ago? What do you mean by back?"

She fingered at her lips with one bony hand. "Why—awake, sir," she said at last.

"Then why didn't you say so?" I snapped. "Why use the word back?"

"Because, sir," she faltered, "that's what he says when he wakes up. 'Well, Mary, I'm back.' I—I guess I just said it because he does, doctor. I—was worrit when he didn't come back—when he didn't wake up, to-night, an' it took to rainin'. I reckon maybe it was th' storm scared me, sir."

Her words had, however, given me a clue. "He's been like this before, then?"

"Yes, sir. But never more than four days without telling me he would. Th' first time was months ago—but it's been gettin' oftener and oftener, till now all his sleeps are like this. He told me not to be scared—an' to—to never bother about him—to—to just let him alone; but—I guess I was scared tonight, when it begun to storm an' him layin' there like that. It was like havin' a corpse in the house."

I began to gain a fuller appreciation of the situation. I myself had seen people in a cataleptic condition, had even induced the state in subjects myself, and it appeared to me that Jason Croft was in a similar state, no matter how induced.

"What does your employer do?" I asked.

"He studies, sir—just studies things like that." Mrs. Goss gestured at the cases of books. "He don't have to work, you know. His uncle left him rich."

I followed her arm as she swept it about the glass-fronted cases. I brought my glances back to the desk in the center of the room, between the woman and myself as we stood. Upon it I spied another volume lying open. It was unlike any book I had ever seen, yellowed with age; in fact not a book at all, but a series of parchment pages tied together with bits of silken cord.

I took the thing up and found the open pages covered with marginal notes in English, although the original was plainly in Sanskrit, an ancient language I had seen before, but was wholly unable to read. The notations, however, threw some light into my mind, and as I read them I forgot the storm, the little old woman—everything save what I read and the bearing it held on the man behind me on the couch. I felt sure they had been written by his own hand, and they bore on the subject of astral projection—the ability of the soul to separate itself, or be separated, from the physical body and return to its fleshy husk again at will.

I finished the open pages and turned to others. The notations were still present wherever I looked. At last I turned

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to the very front and found that the manuscript was by Ahmid, an occult adept of Hindustan, who lived somewhere in the second or third century of the Christian era.

With a strange sensation I laid down the silk-bound pages. They were very, very old. Over a thousand years had come and passed since they were written by the dead Ahmid's hand. Yet I had held them to-night, and I felt sure Jason Croft had held them often—read them and understood them, and that the condition in which I found him this night was in some way subtly connected with their store of ancient lore. And suddenly I sensed the storm and the little old woman and the silent body of the man at my back again, with a feeling of something uncanny in the whole affair.

"YOU can do nothing for him?" the woman broke my introspection.

I looked up and into her eyes, dark and bright and questioning as she stood still clutching her damp shawl.

"I'm not so sure of that," I said. "But—Mr. Croft's condition is rather—peculiar. Whatever I do will require quiet—that I am alone with him for some time. I think if I can be left here with him for possibly an hour, I can bring him back."

I paused abruptly. I had used the woman's former words almost. And I saw she noticed the fact, for a slight smile gathered on her faded lips. She nodded. "You'll bring him back," she said. "Mind you, doctor, th' trouble is with Mr. Jason's head, I've been thinking. 'Twas for that I've been telling myself I would come for you, if he forgot to come back some time, like I've been afraid he would."

"You did quite right," I agreed. "But—the trouble is not with Mr. Croft's mind. In fact, Mrs. Goss, I believe he is a very learned man. How long have you known him, may I ask?"

"Ever since he was a boy, except when he was travelin'," she returned.

"He has traveled?" I took her up.

"Yes, sir, a lot. Me an' my husband kept up th' place while he was gone."

"I see," I said. "And now if you will let me try what I can do."

"Yes, sir. I'll set out in th' hall," she agreed, and turned in her rapid putter from the room.

Left alone, I took a chair, dragged it to the side of the couch, and studied my man.

So far as I could judge, he was at least six feet tall, and correspondingly built. His hair was heavy, almost tawny, and, as I knew, his eyes were gray. The whole contour of his head and features showed what appeared to me remarkable intelligence and strength, the nose finely chiseled, the mouth well formed and firm, the chin unmistakably strong. That Croft was an unusual character I felt more and more as I sat there. His very condition, which, from what I had learned from the little old woman and his own notation on the margins of Ahmid's writings, I believed self-induced, would certainly indicate that.

But my own years of study had taught me no little of hypnosis, suggestion, and the various phases of the subconscious mind. I had developed no little power with various patients, or "subjects," as a hypnotist calls them, who from time to time had submitted themselves to my control. Wherefore I felt that I knew about what to do to waken the sleeping objective mind of the man on the couch. I had asked for an hour, and the time had been granted. It behooved me to get to work.

I began. I concentrated my mind to the exclusion of all else upon my task, sending a mental call to the soul of Jason Croft, wherever it might be, commanding it to return to the body it had temporarily quitted of its own volition, and once more animate it to a conscious life. I forgot the strangeness of the situation, the rattle of the rain against the glass panes of the room. And after a time I began speaking to the form beside which I sat, as to a conscious person, firmly repeating over and over my demand for the presence of Jason Croft—demanding it, nor letting myself doubt for a single instant that the demand would be given heed in time.

It was a nerve-racking task. In the end it came to seem that I sat there and struggled against some intangible, invisible force which resisted all my efforts. I look back now on the time spent there that night as an ordeal such as I never desire to again attempt. But I did not desist. I had asked for an hour, because when I asked I never dreamed the thing I had attempted, the thing which is yet to be related, concerning the weird, yet true narrative, as I fully believe, of Jason Croft.

I had then no conception of how far his venturesome spirit had plumbed the universe. If I thought of him at all, it was merely as some experimenter who might have need of help, rather than as

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an adept of adepts, who had transcended all human accomplishments in his line of research and thought.

In my own blindness I had fancied that his overlong period in his cataleptic trance might even be due to some inability on his part to reanimate his own body, after leaving it where it lay. I thought of myself as possibly aiding him in the task by what I would do in the time for which I had asked.

But the hour ran away, and another, and still the body over which I worked lay as it had lain at first, nor gave any sign of any effect of my concentrated will. It had been close to ten when I came to the house. It was three in the morning when I gained my first reward.

And when it came, it was so sudden that I actually started back in my chair and sat clutching its carved arms, and staring in something almost like horror, I think, at first at the body which had lifted itself to a sitting posture on the couch.

And I know that when the man said, "So you are the one who called me back?" I actually gasped before I answered:

"Yes."

CROFT fastened his eyes upon me in a steady regard. "You are Dr. Murray, from the Mental Hospital, are you not?" he went on.

"Ye-es," I stammered again. Mrs. Goss had said his sleep was like having a corpse about the house. I found myself thinking this was nearly as though a corpse should rise up and speak.

But he nodded, with the barest smile on his lips. "Only one acquainted with the nature of my condition could have roused me," he said. "However, you were engaging in a dangerous undertaking, friend."

"Dangerous for you, you mean," I rejoined. "Do you know you have lain cataleptic for something like a week?"

"Yes." He nodded again. "But I was occupied on a most important mission."

"Occupied!" I exclaimed. "You mean you were engaged in some undertaking while you lay there?" I pointed to the couch where he sat.

"Yes." Once more he smiled.

Well, the man was sane. In fact, it seemed to me in those first few moments that he was far saner than I, far less excited, far less affected by the whole business from the first to last. In fact, he seemed quite calm and a trifle amused, while I was admittedly upset. And my very knowledge gained by years of study told me he was sane, that his was a perfectly balanced brain. There was nothing about him to even hint at anything else, save his extraordinary words. In the end I continued with a question:

"Where?"

"On the planet Palos, one of the Dog Star pack—a star in the system of the sun Sirius," he replied.

"And you mean you have just returned from—there?" I faltered over the last word badly. My brain seemed slightly dazed at the astounding statement he had made—that I—I had called him from a planet beyond the ken of the naked eye, known only to those who studied the heavens with powerful glasses—farther away than any star of our own earthly system of planets. The thing made my senses reel.

And he seemed to sense my emotions, because he went on in a softly modulated tone: "Do not think me in any way similar to those unfortunates under your charge. As an alienist you must know the truth of that, just as you knew that my trancelike sleep was wholly self-induced."

"I gathered that from the volume on your desk," I explained.

He glanced toward Ahmid's work. "You read the Sanskrit??" he inquired.

I shook my head. "No, I read the marginal notes."

"I see. Who called you here?"

I explained.

Croft frowned. "I cannot blame her; she is a faithful soul," he remarked. "I can comprehend her worry. I have explained to her as fully as I dared, but—she does not understand, and I remained away longer than I really intended, to tell the truth. However, now that you can reassure her, I must ask you to excuse me, doctor, for a while. Come to me in about twelve hours and I will be here to meet you and explain in part at least." He stretched himself out once more on the couch.

"Wait!" I cried. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going back to Palos," he told me with a smile.

"But—will your body stand the strain?" I questioned, beginning to doubt his sanity after all.

He met my objection with another smile. "I have studied that well before I began these little excursions of mine. Meet me at, say, four o'clock this afternoon." He appeared to relax, sighed softly, and sank again into his trance.

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I sprang up and stood looking down upon him. I hardly knew what to do. I began pacing the floor. Finally I gave my attention to the books in the cases which lined the room. They comprised the most wonderful collection of works on the occult ever gathered within four walls. They helped me to make up my mind in the end. I decided to take Jason Croft at his word and keep the engagement for the coming afternoon.

I went to the study door and set it open. The little old woman sat huddled on a chair. At first I thought she slept, but almost at once I found her bright eyes upon me, and she started to her feet.

"He came back—I—I heard him speaking," she began in a husky whisper. "He—is he all right?"

"All right," I replied. "But he is asleep again now and has promised to see me this afternoon at four. In the mean time do not attempt to disturb him in any way, Mrs. Goss."

She nodded. Suddenly she seemed wholly satisfied. "I won't, sir," she gave her promise. "I was worrit—worrit—that was all."

"You need not worry any more," I sought to reassure her. "I fancy Mr. Croft is able to take care of himself."

And, oddly enough, I found myself believing my own words as I went down the steps and turned toward my own home to get what sleep I could—since, to tell the truth, I felt utterly exhausted after my efforts to call Jason Croft back from—the planet of a distant sun.

CHAPTER II

A COUNTRY IN THE CLOUDS

AND yet when I woke in the morning and went about my duties at the asylum, I confess the events of the night before seemed rather unreal. I began to half fancy myself the victim of some sort of hoax. I did not doubt that Croft had been up to some psychic experiment when his old servant, Mrs. Goss, had become alarmed and brought me into the situation. But—I felt inclined to believe that after I had waked him from his self-induced trance he had deliberately turned the conversation into a channel which would give me a mental jolt before he had calmly gone back to sleep.

I knew something of the occult, of course, but I was hardly ready to credit the rather lurid statement he had made. Before noon I was smiling at myself, and determining to keep my appointment with him for the afternoon, and show him from the start that I was not so complete a fool as I had seemed.

Hence it was with a resolve not to be swept off my feet by any unusual fabrication of his devising that I approached his house at about three o'clock and turned in from the street to his porch.

He sat there, in a wicker chair, smoking an excellent cigar. No doubt but he had recovered completely from the state in which I had beheld him first. He rose as I mounted the steps and put out a hand. "Ah, Dr. Murray," he greeted me with a smile. "I have been waiting your coming. Let me offer you a chair and a smoke while we talk."

We shook hands, and then I sat down and lighted the mate of the cigar Croft held between his strong, even teeth. Then, as I threw away the match, I looked straight into his eyes. And, believe me or not, it was as though the man read my thoughts.

He shook his head. "I really told you the truth, Murray, you know," he said.

"About—Palos?" I smiled.

He nodded. "Yes, I was really there, and—I went back after we had our talk."

"Rather quick work," I remarked, and puffed out some smoke. "Have you figured out how long it takes even light to reach the earth from that distant star, Mr. Croft?"

"Light?" He half-knit his brows, then suddenly laughed without sound. "Oh, I see—you refer to the equation of time?"

"Well, yes. The distance is considerable, as you must admit."

He shook his head. "How long does it take you to think of Palos—of Sirius?" he asked.

"Not long," I replied.

He leaned back in his seat. "Murray," he went on, staring straight before him, "time is but the measure of consciousness. Outside the atmospheric envelopes of the planets—outside the limit of, well—say—human thought—time ceases to exist. And—if between the planets there is no time beyond the depths of their surrounding atmosphere—how long will it take to go from here to there?"

I stared. His statement was startling, at least.

"You mean that time is a mental conception?" I managed at last.

"Time is a mental measure of a span of eternity," he said slowly. "Past planetary atmospheres, eternity alone exists. In eternity there is no time. Hence, I cannot use what *is not,* either in going

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to or returning from that planet I have named. You admit you can think instantly of Palos. I allege that I can *think* myself, carry my astral consciousness instantly to Palos. Do you see?"

I saw what he meant, of course, and I indicated as much by a nod. "But," I objected, "you told me you had to return to Palos. Now you tell me you had projected your astral body to that star. What could you do there in the astral state?"

He smiled. "Very little. I know. I have passed through that stage. As a matter of fact, I have a body there now."

"You have what—" As I remember, I came half out of my chair, and then sank back. The thing hit me as nothing else in my whole life had done before. His calm avowal was unbelievable on its face—impossible—a man with a double corporeal existence on two separate planets at one and the same time.

"A body—a living, breathing body," he repeated his declaration. "Oh, man, I know it overthrows all human conceptions of life, but—last night you asked me a question concerning *this* body of mine—and I told you I knew what I was doing. And I know you must have studied some of the teachings of the higher cult—the esoteric philosophies, if you will. And therefore you must have read of the ability of a spirit to dispossess a body of its original spiritual tenant and occupy its place—"

"Obsession," I interrupted. "You are practicing that—up there?"

"No. I've gone farther than that. I took this body when its original occupant was done with it," he said. "Murray—wait—let me explain. I'm a physician like yourself."

"You?" I exclaimed, none too politely, I fear, in the face of this additional surprise.

Croft's lips twitched. He seemed to understand and yet be slightly amused. "Yes. That's why I was able to assure you I knew how long the body I occupy now could endure a cataleptic condition last night. I am a graduate of Rush, and I fancy, fully qualified to speak concerning the body's needs. And—" He paused a moment, then resumed:

"Frankly, Murray, I find myself confronted by what I think I may call the strangest position a man was ever called upon to face. Last night I recognized in you one who had probably far from a minor understanding of mental and spiritual forces. Your ability to force my return at a time when I was otherwise engaged showed me your understanding. For that very reason I asked you to return to me here to-day. I would like to talk to you—a brother physician; to tell you a story—my story, provided you would care to hear it. Most men would call me insane. Something tells me you, who devote your time to the care of the insane, will not."

He paused and sat once more staring across the sunlit landscape which, after the storm of the night before, was glowing and fresh. After a time he turned his eyes and looked into mine with something almost an appeal, in his glance. In response, I nodded and settled myself in my chair.

"I'M not going to deny a natural curiosity, Dr. Croft," I said, since, to tell the absolute truth, I was anxious to get at the inward facts underlying the entire peculiar affair.

"Then," he said in an almost eager fashion, "I shall tell you—the whole thing, I think. Murray, when Shakespeare wrote into one of his character's mouth the statement that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of, he told the truth. Mankind in the main is like a crowd storming the doors of a showhouse sold out to capacity and unable to accommodate any one else. Mankind is the crowd in the lobby, shut out from the real sights back of the veiling doors which bar their perception of what goes on within. Mankind stands only on the fringe of life, does not dream of the truth. Only here and there is there one who *knows*. It was one such who first directed my mind toward the truth.

"Murray"—he paused and once more fastened me with his gaze—"I am going to tell that truth to you. . . . But first—in order that you may understand, and believe if you can, I shall tell you something of myself."

That telling took a long time; hours, the rest of the afternoon, and most of the following night. It was a strange tale, an unbelievably strange story. And yet, in view of what happened inside that same week, I am not sure, after all, but it was the truth, just as Croft alleged. What, when all is said, do any of us know beyond the round of our own human life? What do we know of those things which may lie outside the scope of our mental vision? There must be things in heaven and earth not dreamt of in the philosophy of *Horatio*. Here is the tale.

Jason Croft was born in New Jersey,

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but brought West at an early age by his parents, who had become converts to a certain faith. Right there, it seems to me, may have been laid the foundation of Croft's interest in the occult in later life, since that faith contains possibly a greater number of parallels to occult teachings than any of the Occidental creeds. Of course, in all religions there is the germ of truth. Were it not, they would be dead dogmas rather than living sects. But in this church, which has grown strong in the Western States, I think there is a closer approach to the Eastern theory of soul and spiritual life.

Be that as it may, Croft grew to manhood in the very State and town where I was now employed, and in the home on the porch of which we sat. He elected medicine as a career. He went to Chicago and put in his first three years. The second year his mother died, and a year later his father. He returned on each occasion, and went back to his studies after the obsequies were done. In his fourth year he met a man named Gatua Kahaun, destined, as it seems, to change the entire course of his life.

Gatua Kahaun was a Hindu, a member of an Eastern brotherhood, come to the United States to study the religions of the West. One can see how naturally he took up with Croft, who had been raised in one of those religions.

The two became friends. From what Croft told me, the Hindu was a man of marked attainments, well versed in the Oriental creeds. When Croft came West after his graduation, Gatua Kahaun was his companion and stopped at his home, which had been kept up by Mrs. Goss and her husband, then still alive. The two lived there together for some weeks, and the Hindu taught Croft the rudiments at least of the occult philosophy of life.

Then, with little warning, Croft was assigned on a mission to Australia by his church. He got a letter from "Box B," as he told me, smiling, knowing I would understand. The church of which he was a member has a custom of sending their members about the world as missionaries of their faith, to spread its doctrines and win converts to their ranks. Croft went, though even then he had begun to see the similarity between his own lifelong creed and the scheme of things held before him by Gatua Kahaun.

For over two years he did not see the Hindu, though he kept up his studies of the occult, to which he seemed inclined by a natural bent. Then, just as he was nearly finished with his "mission," what should happen but that, walking the streets of Melbourne, he bumped into Gatua Kahaun.

The two men renewed their acquaintance at once. Gatua Kahaun taught Croft Hindustani and the mysteries of the Sanskrit tongue. When Croft's mission was finished he prevailed upon him to visit India before returning home.

Croft went. Through Gatua's influence he was admitted to the man's own brotherhood. He forgot his former objects and aims in life in the new world of thought which opened up before his mental eyes. He studied and thought. He learned the secrets of the magnetic or enveloping body of the soul, and after a time he became convinced that by constant application to the major purpose the spirit could break the bonds of the material body without going through the change which men call death. He came to believe that beyond the phenomenon of astral projection—the sending of the conscious ego about the earthly sphere—projections might be made beyond the planet, with only the universe to limit the scope of the flight.

AT TIMES he lay staring at the starry vault of the heavens with a vague longing within him to put the thing to the test. And always there was one star which seemed to call him, to beckon to him, to draw his spirit toward it as a magnet may draw a fleck of iron. That was the Dog Star, Sirius, known to astronomers as the sun of another planetary system like our own.

Meantime his studies went on. He learned that matter is the reflex of spirit; that no blade of grass, no chemical atom exists save as the envelope of an essence which cannot and does not die. He came to see that nature is no more than a realm of force, comprising light, heat, magnetism, chemical affinity, aura, essence, and all the imponderables which go to produce the various forms of motion as expressions of the ocean of force, so that motion comes to be no more than force refracted through the various forms of existence, from the lowest to the highest, as a ray of light is split into the seven primary colors by a prism, each being different in itself, yet each but an integral part of the original ray.

He came to comprehend that all stages of existence are but stages and nothing more, and that mind, spirit, is the highest form of life force—the true essence—

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manifesting through material means, yet independent of them in itself. So only, he argued, was life after death a possible thing. And so, he reasoned further, could the mystery be solved, there was no real reason why the spirit could not be set free to roam and return to the body at will. If that were true, it seemed to him that the spirit could return from such excursions, bringing with it a conscious recollection of the place where it had been.

Then once more he was called home by a thing which seems like no more than a further step in the course of what mortals call fate. His father's brother died. He was a bachelor. He left Croft sufficient wealth to provide for his every need. Croft decided to pursue his studies at home. He had gained all India could give him. Indeed, he had rather startled even Gatua Kahaun by some of the theories he had deduced.

He began work at once. He stocked the library where I had found him the night before, with everything on the subject he could find. And the more he studied, the more firmly did he become convinced that ordinary astral projection was but the first step in developing the spirit's power—that it was akin to the first step of an infant learning to walk, and that, if confidence were forthcoming, if the will to dare the experiment were sufficiently strong—then he could accomplish the thing of which he dreamed.

He began to experiment, sending his astral consciousness here and there. He centered on that one phase of his knowledge alone. He roamed the earth at will. He perfected his ability to bring back from such excursions a vivid recollection of all he had seen. So at last he was ready for the great experiment. Yet in the end he made it on impulse rather than at any pre-selected time.

He sat one evening on his porch. Over the eastern mountains which hem in the valley the full moon was rising in a blaze of mellow glory. Its rays caught the sleeping surface of a lake which lies near our little city, touching each rippling wavelet until they seemed made of molten silver. The lights of the town itself were like fireflies twinkling amid the trees. The mountains hazed somewhat in a silvery mist, compounded of the moonrays and distance, seemed to him no more than the figments of a fairy tale or a dream.

Everything was quiet. Mrs. Goss, now a widow, had gone to bed, and Croft had simply been enjoying the soft air and a cigar. Suddenly, as the moon appeared to leap free of the mountains, it suggested a thought of a spirit set free and rising above the material shell of existence to his mind.

He sat watching the golden wheel radiant with reflected light, and after a time he asked himself why he should not try the great adventure without a longer delay. He was the last of his race. No one depended upon him. Should he fail, they would merely find his body in the chair. Should he succeed, he would have won his ambition and placed himself in a position to learn of things which had heretofore baffled man.

He decided to try it there and then. Knocking the ash from his cigar, he took one last, long, possibly farewell whiff, and laid it down on the broad arm of his chair. Then summoning all the potent power of his will, he fixed his whole mind upon his purpose and sank into cataleptic sleep.

The moon is dead. In so much science is right. It is lifeless, without moisture, without an atmosphere. Croft won his great experiment, or its first step at least. His body sank to sleep, but his ego leaped into a fuller, wider life.

There was a sensation of airy lightness, as though his sublimated consciousness had dropped material weight. His body sat beneath him in the chair. He could see it. He could see the city and the lake and the mountains and the yellow disk of the moon. He knew he was rising toward the latter swiftly. Then—space was annihilated in an instant, and he seemed to himself to be standing on the topmost edge of a mighty crater in the full, unobstructed glare of a blinding light.

He sensed that as the sun, which hung like a ball of fire halfway up from the horizon, flinging its rays in a dazzling brilliance against the dead satellite's surface, unprotected by an atmospheric screen. His first sensation was an amazing realization of his own success. Then he gazed about.

TO ONE side was the vast ring of the crater itself, a well of unutterable darkness and unplumbed depth, as yet not opened up to the burning light of the sun. To the other was the downward sweep of the crater's flank, dun, dead, wrinkled, seamed and seared by the stabbing rays which bathed it in pitiless light. And beyond the foot of the crater was a vast irregular plain,

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lower in the center as though eons past it might have been the bed of some vanished sea. About the plain were the crests of barren mountains, crags, pinnacles, misshapen and weird beyond thought.

Yes, the moon is dead—now. But—there was life upon it once. Croft willed himself down from the lip of the crater to the plain. He moved about it. Indeed it had been a sea. There in the airless blaze, still etched in the lifeless formations, he found an ancient water-line, the mark of the fingers of vanished waters—like a mockery of what had been. And skirting the outline of that long-lost sea, he came to the ruin of a city which had stood upon the shores a myriad years ago. It stood there still—a thing of paved streets, and dead walls, safe in that moistureless world from decay.

Through those dead streets and houses, some of them thrown down by terrific earthquakes which he judged had accompanied the final cooling stages and death of the moon, Croft took his way, pausing now and then to examine some ancient inscriptions cut into the blocks of stone from which the buildings had been reared. In a way they impressed him as similar in many respects to the Asiatic structures of to-day, most of them being windowless on the first story, but built about an inner court, gardens of beauty in the time when the moon supported life.

So far as he could judge from the buildings themselves and frescoes on the walls, done in pigments which still prevailed, the lunarians had been a tiny people, probably not above an average of four feet in height, but extremely intelligent past any doubt, as shown by the remains of their homes. They had possessed rather large heads in proportion to their slender bodies, as the paintings done on the inside walls led Croft to believe.

From the same source he became convinced that their social life had been highly developed, and that they had been well versed in the arts of manufacture and commerce, and had at the time when lunar seas persisted maintained a merchant marine.

Through the hours of the lunar day he explored. Not, in fact, until the sun was dropping swiftly below the rim of the mountains beyond the old sea-bed, did he desist. Then lifting his eyes he beheld a luminous crescent, many times larger than the moon appears to us, emitting a soft, green light. He stood and gazed upon it for some moment before he realized fully that he looked upon a sunrise on the earth—that the monster crescent was the earth indeed as seen from her satellite.

Then as realization came upon him he remembered his body—left on the porch of his home in the chair. Suddenly he felt a longing to return, to forsake the forsaken relics of a life which had passed and go back to the full, pulsing tide of life which still flowed on.

Here, then, he was faced by the second step of his experiment. He had consciously reached the moon. Could he return again to the earth? If so, he had proved his theory beyond any further doubt. Fastening his full power upon the endeavor, he willed himself back, and—

He opened his eyes—his physical eyes—and gazed into the early sun of a new day rising over the mountains and turning the world to emerald and gold.

The sound of a caught-in breath fell on his ears. He turned his glance. Mrs. Goss stood beside him.

"Laws, sir, but you was sound asleep!" she exclaimed. "I come to call you to breakfast an' you wasn't in your room, an' when I found you you was sleepin' like th' dead. You must have got up awful early, Mr. Jason."

"I was here before you were moving," Croft said as he rose. He smiled as he spoke. Indeed, he wanted to laugh, to shout. He had done what no mortal had ever accomplished before. The wonders of the universe were his to explore at will. Yet even so he did not dream of what the future held.

CHAPTER III

BEYOND THE MOON

AND now the Dog Star called. Croft had proved his ability to project his conscious self beyond earth's attraction and return. And, having proved that, the old lure of the star he had watched when a student in the Indian mountains came back with a double strength. No longer was it an occasional prompting. Rather it was a never-ceasing urge which nagged him night and day.

He yielded at last. But remembering his return from his first experiment, he arranged for the next with due care. In order that Mrs. Goss might not become alarmed by seeing his body entranced,

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he arranged for her to take a holiday with a married daughter in another part of the State, telling her simply that he himself expected to be absent from his home for an indefinite time and would summon her upon his return.

He knew the woman well enough to be sure she would spread the word of his coming absence, and so felt assured that his body would remain undisturbed durthe period of his venture into universal space.

Having seen the old woman depart, he entered the library, drew down all the blinds, and stretched himself on the couch. Fixing his mind on Sirius to the exclusion of everything else, he threw off the bonds of the flesh.

Yet here, as it chanced, even Croft made a well-nigh fatal mistake. It was toward Sirius he had willed himself in his thoughts, and Sirius is a sun. As a result, he realized none too soon that he was floating in the actual nebula surrounding the flaming orb itself.

Directly beneath him, as it appeared, the Dog Star rolled, a mass of electric fire. Mountains of flame ran darting off into space in all directions. Between them the whole surface of the sun boiled and bubbled and seethed like a world-wide caldron. Not for a moment was there any rest upon that surface toward which he was sinking with incredible speed. Every atom of the monster sun was in motion, ever shifting, ever changing yet always the same. It quivered and billowed and shook. Flames of every conceivable color radiated from it in waves of awful heat. Vast explosions recurred again and again on the ever heaving surface. What seemed unthinkable hurricanes rushed into the voids created by the exploding gases.

In this maelstrom of titanic forces Croft found himself caught. Not even the wonderfufl force his spirit had attained could overcome the sun's power of repulsion. His progress stayed, he hung above the molten globe beneath him, imprisoned, unable to extricate himself from his position, buffeted, swirled about and swayed by the irrestible forces which warred around him in a never-ceasing tumult such as he had never conceived.

Something like a vague question as to his fate rather than any fear assailed him, something like a blind wonder. The force which held him was one beyond his experience or knowledge. He knew that a true spirit, a pure ego, could not wholly perish, yet now he asked himself what would be the effect of close proximity to such an enormous center of elemental activity upon an ego not wholly sublimated, such as his.

His will power actually faltered, staggered. For the time being he lost his ability to chose his course. He had willed himself here, and here he was, but he found himself unable to will himself back or anywhere else, in fact. The sensation crept through his soul that he was a plaything of fate, a mad ego which had ventured too far, dared too much, sought to learn those things possibly forbidden, hence caught in a net of universal law, woven about him by his own mad thirst for knowledge—a spirit doomed by its own daring to an eternity of something closely approaching the orthodox hell.

THROUGH eons of time, as it seemed to him, he hung above that blazing orb, surrounded by seething gases which dimmed but did not wholly obscure his vision. Then a change began taking place. A great spot of darkness appeared on the pulsing body of the sun. It widened swiftly. About it the fiery elements of molten mass seemed to center their main endeavor. Vast streamers of flaming gas leaped and darted about its spreading center. It stretched and spread.

To Croft's fascinated vision it showed a mighty, funnel-like chasm, reaching down for thousands of miles into the very heart of their solar mass. And suddenly he knew that once more he was sinking, was being drawn down, down, to be engulfed in that terrible throat of the terrifying funnel, swept and sucked down like a bit of driftwood into the maw of a whirlpool, powerless to resist.

Down he sank, down, between walls of living fire which swirled about him with an inconceivable velocity of revolution. The vapors which closed about him seemed to stifle even his spirit senses. Down, down, how far he had no conception. He had lost all control, all conscious power to judge of time or distance. Yet he was able still to see. And so at last he sensed that the fiery walls were coming swiftly together.

For a wild instant he conceived himself engulfed. Then he knew that he was being thrown out and upward again with terrific force, literally crowded forth with the outrushing gases between the collapsing walls, and hurled again into space.

Darkness came down, a darkness so deep it seemed a thousand suns might

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not pierce it through with their rays. Sirius, the great sun, seemed blotted out. He was seized by a sense of falling through that Stygian shroud. In which direction he knew not, or why or how. He knew only that his ego over which he had lost control was swirling in vast spirals down and down through an endless void to an endless fate—that he who had come so confidently forth to explore the universal secrets had become a waif in the uncharted immensity of the eternal universe.

The sensation went on and on. So much he knew. Still he was conscious. The thought came to him that this was his punishment for daring to know. Still conscious, he must be still bound by natural law. Had he broken that law and been cast into utter darkness, to remain forever conscious of his fate? Yet if so, where was he falling, where was he to wander, and for how long? His senses reeled.

By degrees, however, he fought back to some measure of control. His very necessity prompted the attempt. And by degrees there came to him a sense of not being any longer alone. In the almost palpable darkness it seemed that other shapes and forms, whose warp and woof was darkness also, floated and writhed about him as he fell.

They thrust against him; they gibbered soundlessly at him. They taunted him as he passed. And yet their very presence helped him in the end. He called his own knowledge to his assistance. He recognized these shapes of terror as those elementals of which occult teaching spoke, things which roamed in the darkness, which had as yet never been able to reach out and gain a soul for themselves.

With understanding came again the power of independent action. Unknowing whither, Croft willed himself out of their midst to some spot unnamed, where he might gain a spiritual moment of rest—to the nearest bit of matter afloat in the universal void. Abruptly he became aware of the near presence of some solid substance, the sense of falling ended, and he knew that his will had found expression in fact.

Yet wherever it was he had landed, the region was dead. Like the moon, it was wholly devoid of moisture or atmosphere. The presence of solid matter, however, gave him back a still further sense of control. Though he was still enveloped in darkness, he reasoned that if this was a planet and possessed of a sun in its system, its farther side must be bathed in light. Reason also told him that in all probability he was still within the system of Sirius despite the seemingly endless distance he had come.

Exerting his will, he passed over the darkened face and emerged on the other side in the midst of a ghostly light. At once he became conscious of his surroundings, of a valley and encircling lofty mountains. From the sides of the latter came the peculiar light. Examination showed Croft that it was given off by some substance which glowed with a phosphorescence sufficient to cast faint shadows of the rocks which strewed the dead and silent waste.

Not knowing where he was, loath to dare again the void, hardly knowing whether to will himself back to earth or remain and abide the issue of his own adventure, Croft waited, debating the question, until at length the top of a mountain lighted as if from a rising sun. Inside a few moments the valley was bathed in light; he saw the great sun Sirius wheel up the morning sky.

Peace came into his soul. He was still a conscious ego, still a creature in the universe of light. He gazed about. Close to the line of the horizon, and shining with what was plainly reflected light, he saw the vast outlines of another planet he had failed to note until now.

He understood. This was the major planet, surely one of the Dog Star's pack; and he had alighted on one of its moons. All desire to remain there left him. He was tired of dead worlds, of bottomless voids.

As before on the moon itself, he felt a resurgent desire to bathe in an atmosphere of life. By now, fairly himself again, the wish was father to the fact. Summoning his will, he made the final step of his journey, as it was to prove, and found himself standing on a world not so vastly different from his own.

HE STOOD on the side of a mountain in the midst of an almost tropic vegetation. Giant trees were about him, giant ferns sprouted from the soil. But here, as on earth, the color of the leaves was green. Through a break in the forest he gazed across a vast, wide-flung plain through which a mighty river made its way. Its waters glinted in the rays of the rising sun. Its banks were lined with patches of what he knew from their appearance were cultivated fields. Beyond them was a dun track, reminding him of

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the arid stretches of a desert, reaching out as far as his vision could plumb the distance.

He turned his eyes and followed the course of the river. By stages of swift interest he traced it to a point where it disappeared beneath what seemed the dull red walls of a mighty city. They were huge walls, high and broad, bastioned and towered, flung across the course of the river, which ran on through the city itself, passed beyond a farther wall, and—beyond that again there was the glint of silver and blue in Croft's eyes—the shimmer of a vast body of water—whether lake or ocean he did not know then.

The call of a bird brought his attention back. Life was waking in the mountain forest where he stood. Gay-plumaged creatures, not unlike earthly parrots, were fluttering from tree to tree. The sound of a grunting came toward him. He swung about. His eyes encountered those of other life. A creature such as he had never seen was coming out of a quivering mass of sturdy fern. It had small, beady eyes and a snout like a pig. Two tusks sprouted from its jaws like the tusks of a boar. But the rest of the body, although something like that of a hog, was covered with a long wool-like hair, fine and seemingly almost silken soft.

This, as he was to learn later, was the tabur, an animal still wild on Palos, though domesticated and raised both for its hair, which was woven into fabrics, and for its flesh, which was valued as food. While Croft watched, it began rooting about the foot of a tree on one side of the small glade where he stood. Plainly it was hunting for something to eat.

Once more he turned to the plain and stood lost in something new. Across the dun reaches of the desert, beyond the green region of the river, was moving a long dark string of figures, headed toward the city he had seen. It was like a caravan, Croft thought, in its arrangement, save that the moving objects which he deemed animals of some sort, belonged in no picture of a caravan such as he had ever seen.

Swiftly he willed himself toward them and moved along by their side. Something like amazement filled his being. These beasts were such creatures as might have peopled the earth in the Silurian age. They were huge, twice the size of an earthly elephant. They moved in a majestic fashion, yet with a surprising speed. Their bodies were covered with a hairless skin, reddish pink in color, wrinkled and warted and plainly extremely thick. It slipped and slid over the muscles beneath it as they swung forward on their four massive legs, each one of which ended in a five-toed foot armed with short heavy claws.

But it was the head and neck and tail of the things which gave Croft pause. The head was more that of a sea-serpent or a monster lizard than anything else. The neck was long and flexible and curved like that of a camel. The tail was heavy where it joined the main spine, but thinned rapidly to a point. And the crest of head and neck, the back of each creature, so far as he could see, was covered with a sort of heavy scale, an armor devised by nature for the thing's protection, as it appeared. Yet he could not see very well, since each Sarpelca, as he was to learn their Palosian name, was loaded heavily with bundles and bales of what might be valuable merchandise.

And on each sat a man. Croft hesitated not at all to give them that title, since they were strikingly like the men of earth in so far as he could see. They had heads and arms and legs and a body, and their faces were white. Their features departed in no particular, so far as he could see, from the faces of earth, save that all were smooth, with no evidence of hair on upper lip or cheek or chin.

They were clad in loose cloak-like garments and a hooded cap or cowl. They sat the Sarpelcas just back of the juncture of the body and neck, and guided the strange-appearing monsters by means of slender reins affixed to two of the fleshy tentacles which sprouted about the beast's almost snakelike mouths.

That this strange cortège was a caravan Croft was now assured. He decided to follow it to the city and inspect that as well. Wherefore he kept on beside it down the valley, along what he now saw was a well-defined and carefully constructed road, built of stone, cut to a nice approximation, along which the unwieldy procession made good time. The road showed no small knowledge of engineering. It was like the roads of Ancient Rome, Croft thought with quickened interest. It was in a perfect state of preservation and showed signs of recent mending here and there. While he was feeling a quickened interest in this the caravan entered the cultivated region along the river, and Croft gave his attention to the fields.

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THE first thing he noted here was the fact that all growth was due to irrigation, carried out by means of ditches and laterals very much as on earth at the present time. Here and there as the caravan passed down the splendid road he found a farmer's hut set in a bower of trees. For the most part they were built of a tan-colored brick, and roofed with a thatching of rushes from the river's bank. He saw the natives working in the fields, strong-bodied men, clad in what seemed a single short-skirted tunic reaching to the knees, with the arms and lower limbs left bare.

One or two stopped work and stood to watch the caravan pass, and Croft noticed that their faces were intelligent, well featured, and their hair for the most part a sort of rich, almost chestnut brown, worn rather long and wholly uncovered or else caught about the brows by a cincture which held a bit of woven fabric draped over the head and down the neck.

Travel began to thicken along the road. The natives seemed heading to the city, to sell the produce of their fields. Croft found himself drawing aside in the press as the caravan overtook the others and crowded past. So real had it become to him that for the time he forgot he was no more than an impalpable, invisible thing these people could not contact or see. Then he remembered and gave his attention to what he might behold once more.

They had just passed a heavy cart drawn by two odd creatures, resembling a deer save that they were larger and possessed of hoofs like those of earth-born horses, and instead of antlers sported two little horns not over six inches long. They were in color almost a creamy white, and he fancied them among the most beautiful forms of animal life he had ever beheld. On the cart itself were high piled crates of some unknown fowl, as he supposed—some edible bird, with the head of a goose, the plumage of a pheasant so far as its brilliant coloring went, long necks and bluish, webbed feet. Past the cart they came upon a band of native women carrying baskets and other burdens, strapped to their shoulders. Croft gave them particular attention, since as yet he had seen only men.

The Palosian females were fit mates, he decided, after he had given them a comprehensive glance. They were strong limbed and deep breasted. These peasant folks at least were simply clad. Like the men, they wore but a single garment, falling just over the bend of the knees and caught together over one shoulder with an embossed metal button, so far as he could tell. The other arm and shoulder were left wholly bare, as were their feet and legs, save that they wore coarse sandals of wood, strapped by leather thongs about ankle and calf. Their baskets were piled with vegetables and fruit, and they chattered and laughed among themselves as they walked.

And now as the Sarpelcas shuffled past, the highway grew actually packed. Also it drew nearer to the river and the city itself. The caravan thrust its way through a drove of the taburs—the woolly hogs such as Croft had seen on the side of the mountain. The hogsherds, rough, powerful, bronzed fellows, clad in hide aprons belted about their waists and nothing else, stalked beside their charges and exchanged heavy banter with the riders of the Sarpelcas as the caravan passed.

From behind a sound of shouting reached Croft's ears. He glanced around. Down the highway, splitting the throng of early market people, came some sort of conveyance, drawn by four of the beautiful creamy deerlike creatures he had seen before. They were harnessed abreast and had nodding plumes fixed to the head bands of their bridles in front of their horns. These plumes were all of a purple color, and from the way the crowds gave way before the advance of the equipage, Croft deemed that it bore some one of note. Even the captain of the Sarpelca train, noting the advance of the gorgeous team, drew his huge beasts to the side of the road and stood up in his seatlike saddle to face inward as it passed.

THE vehicle came on. Croft watched intently as it approached. So nearly as he could tell, it was a four-wheeled conveyance something like an old-time chariot in front, where stood the driver of the cream-white steeds, and behind that protected from the sun by an arched cover draped on each side with a substance not unlike heavy silk. These draperies, too, were purple in shade, and the body and wheels of the carriage seemed fashioned from something like burnished copper, as it glistened brightly in advance.

Then it was upon them, and Croft could look squarely into the shaded depths beneath the cover he now saw to

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be supported by upright metal rods, save at the back where the body continued straight up in a curve to form the top.

The curtains were drawn back since the morning air was still fresh, and Jason gained a view of those who rode. He gave them one glance and mentally caught his breath. There were two passengers in the coach—a woman and a man. The latter was plainly past middle age, well built, with a strongly set face and hair somewhat sprinkled with gray. He was clad in a tunic the like of which Croft had never seen, since it seemed woven of gold, etched and embroidered in what appeared stones or jewels of purple, red, and green. This covered his entire body and ended in half sleeves below which his forearms were bare.

He wore a jeweled cap supporting a single spray of purple feathers. From an inch below his knees his legs were incased in what seemed an open-meshed casing of metal, in color not unlike his tunic, jointed at the ankles to allow of motion when he walked. There were no seats proper in the carriage, but rather a broad padded couch upon which both passengers lay.

So much Croft saw, and then, forsaking the caravan, let himself drift along beside the strange conveyance to inspect the girl. In fact, after the first swift glance at the man, he had no eyes save for his companion in the coach.

She was younger than the man, yet strangely like him in a feminine way—more slender, more graceful as she lay at her ease. Her face was a perfect oval, framed in a wealth of golden hair, which, save for a jeweled cincture, fell unrestrained about her shoulders in a silken flood. Her eyes were blue—the purple blue of the pansy—her skin, seen on face and throat and bared left shoulder and arm, a soft, firm white. For she was dressed like the peasant women, save in a richer fashion. Her single robe was white, lustrous in its sheen. It was broidered with a simple jeweled margin at throat and hem and over the breasts with stones of blue and green.

Her girdle was of gold in color, catching her just above the hips with long ends and fringe which fell down the left side of the knee-length skirt. Sandals of the finest imaginable skin were on the soles of her slender pink-nailed feet, bare save for a jewel-studded toe and instep band, and the lacing cords which were twined about each limb as high as the top of the calf. On her left arm she wore a bracelet, just above the wrist, as a single ornament.

Croft gave her one glance which took in every detail of her presence and attire. He quivered as with a chill. Some change as cataclysmic as his experience of the night before above the Dog Star itself took place in his spiritual being. He felt drawn toward this beautiful girl of Palos as he had never in all his life on earth been drawn toward a woman before.

It was as though suddenly he had found something he had lost—as though he had met one known and forgotten and now once more recognized. Without giving the act the slightest thought of consideration, he willed himself into the coach between the fluttering curtains of purple silk, and crouched down on the padded platform at her feet.

CHAPTER IV

NAIA, PRINCESS OF PALOS

CROFT, in his earth life, had never looked on a woman with the longing such as is apt to possess the average healthy male at times. But in his studies of the occult he had more than once come in contact with the doctrine of

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twin souls—that theory that in the beginning the spirit is dual, and that projecting into material existence the dual entity separates into two halves, a male and a female, and so exists forever until the two halves meet once more and unite.

Sometimes because he had never found a woman to appeal to him as he wished a woman to appeal, he had been half inclined to doubt. But this morning on Palos he no longer doubted. He believed. More than that he knew now why no earth woman had ever reached to the center of his being with her soft attraction. He knew now why the Dog Star had always drawn him during his student days. That longing to span the miles between Sirius and earth was explained. It was because in the economy of the Infinite it had been seen fit, God alone knew why, to send his half of their original spirit to earth, and his female counterpart to this life on another sphere.

This beautiful girl was his twin. He knew her. He had found her. A wonderful elation filled his conscious soul as he sat feasting his eyes upon her every graceful line and feature. But suddenly his contemplation was followed by the bitterest despair.

He had found her, yes; but to what avail? The mere fact that he saw her now and was unseen by either her or her father, as he judged the man with whom she rode to be, was proof that his finding her was vain. She was a living, breathing woman, every cell of whose glowing body sent a subtle call to his spirit, such as only the true mate can send to its absolute complement.

He felt love, a sense of protection, a desire for possession, spiritual uplift, and physical passion all in a breath. He felt a mad urge to cast himself at her side, there on the padded cushion, and gather her lovely form to his heart close within his arms. And he knew himself but a spirit—invisible to her—imperceptible to her—realized that should he follow his impulse she would not know—or should she know even faintly would not understand.

Croft knew himself but a sublimated shape, and nothing more, and it was then he went down into the deepest depths of a mental hell of despair. The torture of Tantalus was his. He could see her, sense her youth, her beauty, her sweetness, every charm which was hers; experience every potent wave of her appeal, yet he could not reveal his presence or make known his response to her spirit-call. Could he have done so he would have groaned in a crushing anguish too great to be endured. Yet even that expression was denied.

The stopping of the gnuppas, as he was to learn the half horse, half deer-like steers were called, brought him back from his introspection after a time. He could hear the driver shouting, and now quite oddly, these people being human, and thoughts being more or less akin to all thinking minds, he found he could understand the intent, even though the words were strange.

"Way! Way for Prince Lakkon, Counselor to the King of Aphur!"

On the words the girl opened her lips. "There is a wonderful press of travelers this morning, my father."

Croft gloried in the soft, full tones of her voice, even before Prince Lakkon made answer. "Aye, the highway is like to a swarm of insects, Naia, my child."

Naia! The sound was music in Croft's ears. He whispered it over and over to himself as the carriage once more advanced through the throngs of market people, carters, freighters, past a caravan of heavily loaded Sarpelcas outward bound. Naia. The word fitted her—seemed oddly appropriate—was music in his ears. Naia, Naia—the other part of his soul. The word beat upon his senses through the shuffle of passing feet.

"I shall tell Chythron to drive directly to our home," Prince Lakkon said.

"You will go on to confer with Uncle Jadgor from there?"

"Aye. You will have most of the day to set the servants about the preparations for the coming of Prince Kyphallos. Spare no expense, Naia, in those preparations. Report hath it he is a hard young man to please."

"Such reports as I have heard would not confirm yours, my father," Naia retorted with a contemptuous curl of her crimson lips. "What has come to my ears would prove him no better than a beast, far too easy to please, indeed."

Prince Lakkon shook his head. "Child!" he chided in sibilant fashion. "You must not speak such words of a Prince of Tamarizia, Naia."

But the maid replied more calmly: "I speak not of him as a Prince of Tamarizia, but as a man and his attitude toward women."

CROFT was rather surprised to see Lakkon frown at his daughter's speech. He himself applauded her attitude toward a man he judged must be a profligate of national reputation. He set the man's facial grimace down to

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mere distaste for hearing any one of royal blood disrated, and as the prince made no reply, sat waiting what might happen next and watching Naia where she reclined.

"What brings him to Himyra?" she questioned at length.

"He comes on matters of state." Prince Lakkon's reply was almost rudely sharp and short. As he ended his answer he sighed and lifted himself to a cross-legged seat. "Ah, here we are at the gate. Naia, there is nothing finer in all Tamarizia than this. No, not even in Zitra itself."

Whether he uttered the exact truth or not Croft did not then know, but as he gazed from the coach between the curtains of fluttering purple he was inclined to agree.

They had come to a place outside the walls—those monster walls Croft had seen hours ago, shining a dull deep red in the morning sun. Now close by, they towered above him in their mighty mass—still red—a deep, ruddy red with an odd effect of a glaze on the surface of what he could now perceive was some sort of artificial building block laid in cement. So far as he could judge, the wall rose a good hundred feet above the road and stretched away on either side, strengthened and guarded every so far by a jutting tower as far as his eye could reach.

Where they now stood the road came down to the bank of the river on a wide-built approach made of stone masonry laid in cement, protected on the shoreline by a wall or rail, fully six feet wide across its top, which was provided every so far with huge stone urns, blackened about their upper edges as though from fire. Croft recognized their purpose as that of flaming beacons to light the wide stone esplanade before the gate at night.

Beyond the wall was the river—a vast yellow flood, moving slowly along. It was at least a half-mile wide where it met the wall. And the wall crossed it on a series of arches, leaving free way for the boats Croft now saw upon the yellow water, equipped with sails and masts, making slow advance against the current, or driven perhaps by their crews at long sweeplike oars. He noted that each arch was guarded by what seemed gates of metal lattice, and that drawn up above each was a huge metal door which could be let down in case of need to present an unbroken outward front above the surface of the flood.

It was a wonderful sight, river, wall, and wide-paved approach as the gnupas drew the carriage swiftly toward the gates. Then it all vanished. Croft caught sight of two men dressed something like ancient Roman soldiers, huge, powerful fellows, with metal cuirass, spear and shield, barelegged half up their thighs where a short skirt extended, their shins covered by metal greaves, their heads inside metal casques from the top of which sprouted a tuft of wine-red plumes.

They stood beside the leaves of two huge doors, fashioned from copper, as it seemed to Croft, things solidly molded, carved, graved, and embossed in an intricate design. These doors were open and the carriage darted through, entering a shadowy tunnel in the wall itself.

It was high, wide, and deep, the latter dimension giving the actual width of the wall itself. Croft judged it to be nearly as wide as tall. Then it was passed, and he found himself gazing upon such a scene as had never met mortal eyes perhaps since the days of Babylon.

The great river flowed straight before him for a distance so great that the farther wall was lost in a shimmering haze of heat. It flowed between solid walls of stone, cut and fitted to perfect jointure. From the lowest quay the banks sloped back in gentle terraces, green with grass and studded with trees and blooming masses of flowers and shrubs.

Huge stairways and gradually sloping roadways ran from terrace to terrace, down the river's course. And back of the terraced banks there stretched off and away the splendid piles of house after house, huge, massive, each a palace in itself, until beyond them, seemingly halfway down the wonderful river gardens, there loomed a structure greater, vaster, more wide-flung than any of the rest. In the light of the risen sun it shone an almost blinding white. To Croft at that distance it appeared built of an absolutely spotless stone.

AS FOR the other houses, surely as he felt the abodes of the nobles and the rich, they were constructed mainly of red sandstone, red granites and marbles, although here and there was one which glowed white through the surrounding trees, or perhaps a combination of red and white both. Yet, aside from the monster structure in the distance, the majority were red. Indeed, he was to come to know later that the word Himyra meant red in the literal sense; that in the Palosian tongue this was the "red city," just as he was to learn also that the name of the mighty

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river was Na, because of its yellow colored flood.

But this morning he knew none of that as he gazed down the terraced vista, bathed in the rays of Sirius, now rapidly mounting the sky.

And there was much to see. Across from the vast white building, on the other side of the river Na, he beheld a pyramid. He could call it nothing else in his earthly mind. It, too, was huge, vast—a monster red pile, rising high above all other buildings in the city, until near the top was a final terrace or story of blinding white, capped with a finishing band of red; the whole thing supporting a pure white structure, pillared and porticoed like a temple on its truncated top. Even in the distance it was a monster thing. How large he could not tell. Later he was to know it was two thousand feet square at the base, and three hundred feet in its rise above its foundation, ere the temple of Zitu was reached.

But then it struck him merely as vast. Indeed, the whole vista so impressed him, with its palaces, its mighty river, its terraces and parks, and the great white structure toward which they were rapidly dashing along a road before the massive dwellings each surrounded by its own private park. Far, far ahead he caught the dim outline of the farther city wall. He began to feel somewhat like Gulliver in the land of Brobdingnag save that the city life which he had seen was little larger than that of its kind on earth.

And now between the great white palace and the pyramid a bridge grew into being before his eyes. While he watched span after span swung into place to form the whole. Already he had noted a series of masonry pillars in the stream, but had not comprehended what they meant. Closer examination was to teach him that each supported a metal span, mounted on rollers and worked by the tug of the current itself through a series of bucketlike bits of apparatus, which dragged the sections open or drew them shut; also that at night the sections were opened to permit free passage to boats.

The things like the terraces and the roads showed a good knowledge of engineering as a charecteristic of the Palosian peoples. But from the fact that the terraces and the river embankment were studded at intervals with more of the stone fire urns, Croft decided that they were unacqainted with the use of electricity in any form. Nor did they seem to be possessed of a practical knowledge of the various applications of steam.

None of the boats on the river, of which there were many, some plainly pleasure craft equipped with parti-colored sails and others as plainly freight and commercial barges, but were propelled by sail and oar. Nor was the traffic of the streets other than by foot, or by equipages drawn by gnuppas, such as Prince Lakkon's driver was guiding down the well-paved street.

In fact, the more Croft saw of the city of Himyra, the more did he become convinced that civilization on Palos had risen little above the stage which had marked the Assyrian and Babylonian states on earth in their day.

Prince Lakkon spoke now to Chythron a word of direction and turned to his daughter again. "I shall be with Jadgor the greater part of the day. You, Naia, as head of my household, must see to these preparations, since as counselor to the king I must show a noble from Cathur what courtesy I may, in an official capacity at least. Aphur and Cathur guard the highway to all outer nations. Those who would carry goods must pass through the gate and so up the Na even to the region of Mazzer. Cathur is a mighty state."

"As is Ahpur, which holds the mouth of the Na," the girl returned.

"Aye. Together with Nodur, whose interests are Aphur's interests, the three could place your Uncle Jadgor on the imperial throne when the term of the Emperor Tamhys shall expire."

CROFT picked his ears, even as he saw a quickened interest wake in Naia's face. Plainly Lakkon spoke of various states of the country, and it was evident that the girl understood the full import of her father's words. "Only Bithur would be against him," she said.

"Hardly all of Bithur. It lies too close to the lost state of Mazhur for that," Lakkon replied. "There were seven states in the Tamarizian Empire, as you know, before the war with the Zolliarians took one and gave Zollaria their first seaport on the central ocean, through our loss." His face darkened as he spoke. "Small good it did them, however, since there is still the Na, and our other rivers to which they pay toll, if they wish to sail to Mazzer or the other barbarian tribes. And as long as Cathur and Aphur guard the gate small good will it do them. Zitemku take them and all their spawn!"

"As long as Cathur holds!" Naia exclaimed.

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Lakkon nodded. "Aye. Cathur stands cut off from the rest of Tamarizia, as you know, by Mazhur's fall. Jadgor would see to it that Cathur still stands despite that fact or Zollaria's plans, if she has them, as some of us fear. Tamhys is a man of peace. So am I if I may be and Zitu sends it; yet will I fight for my own."

"And Kyphallos comes in regard to this—this—alliance?"

Prince Lakkon nodded. "Aye. List you, Naia. Order Bazka to send runners to the hills to bring back snows on the eighth day from this. Kyphallos likes his wines cooled, and will drink no other. In our own place I have given orders for all friuts and fish and fowls to be made ready at the appointed time. See to it that the house is decked for his coming—that all things are made clean and fit for inspection. As for yourself, you must have a new robe. Spare no expense, my child, spare no expense."

Naia's eyes lighted as he paused. "I should desire it of gold broidered in purple," she flashed back, smiling; "with purple sandals wrought with gold."

And suddenly as the carriage turned into a broad approach leading from the main street to a huge red palace, Lakkon laughingly remarked:

"Have what you will, so long as it becomes thy beauty. Well are you called Naia—maid of gold."

The carriage paused before the double leaves of a molded copper door. Chythron reached out and, seizing a cord which hung down from an arm at one side, tugged sharply upon it to sound a deep-toned gong, which boomed faintly within.

He willed his unseen self toward the strange caravan, and stood amazed

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Hardly had the sound died than the two leaves rolled back, sinking into sockets in the walls of the building itself, to reveal a vast interior to the eye, and in the immediate foreground the figure of a man who gave Croft a start of surprise.

He was nude as Adam, save for a narrow cord about the loins, supporting a broad phallary of purple leather. And he was blue! From his shaven scalp which supported a single stiff upstanding tuft of ruddy hair throughout his entire superbly supple length he was blue. And the color was natural to his skin. At first Jason had thought him painted, until a closer glance had proved his mistake. Aside from his surprising complexion he seemed human enough, with dark eyes, high molar prominences, and a strongly bridged nose. He was indeed not unlike an American Indian, Croft thought, or perhaps a Tartar. He remembered now that in times long past the Tartars had worn scalp locks, too.

The blue man bowed from the hips, straightened, and stood waiting.

Lakkon sprang from the coach and assisted Naia to alight.

"Bazka," he spoke in command, "your mistress returns. Give ear to her words and do those things she says until I come again."

He sprang back into the coach, and Chythron swung the equipage about. He cried aloud to the gnuppas, and they dashed away, back toward the road along the Na. Croft found himself standing before the open door of Prince Lakkon's city palace with Naia and the strange blue man.

"Call thy fellow servants," the Palosian princess directed as she passed inside and Bazka closed the doors by means of a golden lever affixed to the inner wall. "I shall see them here and issue my commands."

She walked with the grace of limbs unrestrained toward the center of the wonderful hall.

For wonderful it was. At first Croft had thought it paved, in part at least, with glass of a faultless grade. But as he passed by Naia's side toward the center of the half room, half court in which flowers and shrubs and even small trees grew in beds between the pavement, he saw it was in reality some sort of transparent, colorless crystal, cut and set into an intricate design.

Yet that the Palosians made glass he soon found proof. Casting his eyes aloft, he saw the metal framework of an enclosing roof arching the court above his head. Plainly it was thrown across the width of the court to support shutters made of glass of several colors, some of them in place, others removed or laid back to leave the court open to the air.

THE court itself was two stories high, and from either end rose a staircase of some substance like a lemon-yellow onyx, save that it seemed devoid of any mottling of veins. These stairs mounted to the upper gallery, supported above the central grand apartment on a series of pure white pillars, between which gleamed the exquisite forms of sculptured figures and groups.

There was also a group done in some stone of a translucent white, at the foot of each great stair. One, Croft noted, depicted a man and a woman locked in each other's arms. The other showed a winged figure, binding up the broken pinion of a bird. "Love" and "Mercy" he thought. If this were a sample of the ideal of this people, they must be a nation worth while.

So much he saw, and then Naia seated herself on a chair of a wine-red wood, set beside a hedge of some unknown vegetation which enclosed a splendid central space of the crystal floor.

Bazka had disappeared, but now came the sound of voices, and the servants appeared, emerging from a passage beneath one of the stairs. There were several members of both sexes in the group, and, like Bazka himself, one and all wore no more than a purple apron about the thighs. Croft was to learn in the end that the Palosians wore clothing more as a protection against the elements than for any desire to conceal the form; and with that fact he was to find them a highly moral people none the less.

Now, though their apparel, or lack of it, was something of a shock to his sense of conventions, as the men and women of the blue tribe advanced to greet their mistress in her chair, and listen to those directions she gave, he found himself wondering if they were slaves. Indeed he so regarded them until he knew more of the planet to which he had come. Then he knew slavery no longer existed among the Tamarizians, and that the blue men and women were the children of former slaves captured in wars, but now freed, given the rights of citizenship and paid by those whom they served.

In the end Naia turned to one of the women and ordered her to go to a cloth merchant and bid him attend her at once, with fabrics from which to choose her gown. That done, she dismissed each

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to his or her task, rose, and moved down the court. Croft followed as she went, mounted one of the yellow stairs, and came out on the upper balcony, down which she passed over an inlaid floor, beside walls frescoed with what he took to be scenes of Palosian history and social life.

She paused at a door fashioned from the wine-red wood, set it open, and entered an apartment plainly her own. Its walls were faced with the same yellow stone used in the stairs. Purple draperies broke the color here and there. Purple curtains hung beside two windows which she set open, turning the casings on hinges, to let in the air. In the center of the floor, which was covered with woven rugs and the skins of various beasts, was a circular metal basin holding water in a shallow pool. On one side was a pedestal of gold supporting a pure white miniature of a winged male figure, poised on toes as if about to take flight.

Beside the pool Naia paused as she turned from opening the window. Her figure was reflected from the motionless surface. Croft recognized it as a mirror in purpose, similar in all respects to those the ancient Phenicians used. For a time she stood gazing at the image of her figure, then turned away to a chest, made of the wine-red wood, heavily bound with burnished copper bands.

Beside the chest, the room held several chairs and stools, and a molded copper couch covered with rich draperies.

Naia rummaged in the chest while Croft watched. She rose and turned with a garment in her hands. Gossamer it was, fine, soft, sheer, a cobweb of texture as she shook it out. It shimmered with an indefinable play of colors, transparent as gauze. She lifted a hand and unfastened the gown she wore from the heavy shoulder boss that held it in place.

CHAPTER V

PALOSIAN DIPLOMACY

TAKEN wholly by surprise, Croft caught one glimpse of a glowing, pliant figure, cinctured just above the hips by a golden girdle. Then, realizing that the maiden believed herself utterly alone, he turned to the open window and incontinently fled.

Light as a thistle-down in his sublimated self he emerged into the full Palosian day. Yet he quivered in his soul as with a chill. Naia of Aphur, Princess of the Tamarizian nation, was a woman to stir the soul of any man. And she was his—his! The thought blurred his senses as he rushed forth. His? A second thought gave him pause. His indeed, yet no more his now than always since their dual spirit had projected into the material world and had been lost each to the other how many eons ago? His—found now at last, yet unclaimable still! Unclaimable!

The thought was madness. Croft put it away—or tried. To distract himself he wandered over the city of Himyra stretched red in the Sirian ray. And as before he knew it vast. From the river it stretched in its red and white collection of walls both ways. He visited each part, finding it poorer and poorer as he wandered from the river to the walls until inside them, at all parts, save where the main avenue by the river reached the two principal gates, he found the poorest classes of the people dwelling in huts of yellow-red brick.

Yet Himyra was a wonderful place. Croft visited the quays along the Na, farthest from the gate, where he had entered with Prince Lakkon and his daughter hours before. They swarmed with life, were lined with boats, built principally of wood, though some were mere skin-covered coracles, more than anything else. They lay by the stone loading platforms, taking on or discharging the commerce of the Palosian world. Men, white and blue, swarmed about them, tugging, sweating, straining at their tasks, speaking a variety of tongues.

From the loading platforms on the lower levels tunnels ran up beneath the terraces on the surface to reach the warehouses above where the goods were stored. Within them, moving in metal-grooves braced to an equal width by cross-bars fixed to the floors, small flat-topped cars were drawn by whipcord-muscled creatures like giant dogs.

Croft followed one such team to a warehouse and watched the storing of the load by a series of blue-skinned porters, under the captaincy of a white Aphurian who marked each package and bale with a symbol before it was carried away. This captain wore a tunic, metal-work cases on his calves and sandals and a belt, from which depended a short, broad-bladed sword. He had seen his counterpart on the quays as well and was satisfied that Himyra had a very efficient system of officers of the port.

From the warehouse he went toward an adjacent section, evidently the retail

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mart of the town. Here were shops of every conceivable nature open in front like those of some Oriental bazaar. At this hour of the day business was brisk. More than one Palosian lady had come in a gnuppa-drawn conveyance to see and choose her purchases for herself. A steady current of life, motion and speech, ran through the section. Blue attendants, male or female, as the chance fell out, walked with these matrons of Palos, shielding their heads from the sun with parasols woven of feathers, held above them on long handles, while they examined, selected, and bought. Porters brought baskets of fruit and flowers, bolts of cloth, strings of jewels to the metal-built carriages behind returning women, and bowed their patrons away.

Suddenly the sound of a vast, mellow gong, a series of gongs, like an old-time carillon rang out. The bustle of the market stopped. As by one accord the people turned toward the vast pyramid beyond the river and stood standing, gazing toward it.

It came over Croft that it was here the great chime had sounded—that this midday cessation in the activities of life had something to do with the religion of the nation. Driven by his will, he reached the great structure where the topmost temple shone, dazzling in the noontime light. He found himself on the vast level top of the pyramid itself. Before him was the temple supported on a base, its doors reached by a flight of stairs. It was pillared with monster monoliths, crowned by huge capitals which supported the porticoed roof.

A sound as of chanting came from within. Croft mounted the stairs and passed the doors and paused before the beauty of what he saw.

The temple was roofed with massive slabs of stone save in the exact center, where an opening was left. Through that aperture the light of the midday sun was falling to bathe a wonderful figure in its rays.

THE face of the statue was divine—the face of a man, superbly strong, broad-browed, and with purity and strength writ in its every line. The head and face were wrought in purest white as were the bared left shoulder and arm. Below that the figure was portrayed as clad in gold, which was also the material used in modeling the staff crowned by a loop and cross-bar, grasped by the hand of the extended left arm. The man was portrayed as seated on a massive throne. Now as the sun's rays struck full upon it, it seemed that the strong face glowed with an inward fire.

On either side of the statue stood a living man, shaven of head, wearing long white robes which extended to their feet. Each held in his hand a miniature replica of the stave held by the statue—a staff crowned by a golden cross-bar and loop.

Croft started. This was the *crux ansata* of the ancient Egyptians in all outward form—the symbol of life everlasting, of man's immortality. And he found it here on Palos on the top of a pyramid.

The chant he had heard was growing louder. It held a feminine timbre to his ears. At the rear of the temple a curtain swept aside seemingly of its own volition and a procession appeared. It was formed of young girls—their hair garlanded with flowers, each carrying a flaming blossom in her hand. They advanced, singing as they came, to form a kneeling circle in front of the monster statue on its throne.

They were clad in purest white, unadorned from their rosy shoulders to their dimpled knees save for a cincture of golden tissue which ran about the neck, down between the breasts, back about the body, and around to fasten in front like a sash with pendent ends, which hung in a golden fringe to the edge of the knee-length skirt.

And as they advanced and knelt and rose and cast their offering of flowers before the glowing statue, they continued to chant the harmony which had first reached Croft's ear. In it the word Zitu recurred, again and again. Zitu then was the name of the statue—the name of the god. He listened intently and finally gained the purport of the hymn.

"Zitu, hail Zitu!
Father of all life!
Who through thy angels
Give life and withdraw it,
Into our bodies—out of our bodies;
God—the one god—
Accept our praise."

The chant died and the singer turned back behind the curtain, which swung shut as they passed. Croft left the temple and stood on the top of its broad approach, gazing across the river at the vast white structure which he had first seen at a distance that morning, and which now stretched directly before his eyes. It came to him that this was the

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capital of Aphur—the palace of that Jadgor—Prince Lakkon had mentioned, brother of Naia's mother, as he was to learn. Bent on seeing the man who aspired to Tamarizia's imperial throne at close quarters, he willed himself toward the far-flung white pile.

It was built of stone he did not know, as he found when he came down to the broad, paved esplanade before it. But the substance seemed to be between a marble and an onyx, so nearly as he could judge. It stretched for the best part of an earth-mile and housed the entire working force of the Aphur government as he came to know in the following days.

Now, however, he gave more attention to his immediate surroundings—the vast towers on either side of the monstrous entrance, heavy and imposing and each flanked by guardian figures of what seemed winged dogs, whose front legs supported webbed membranes from body to paw.

Croft passed between them through the entrance where flowed counter streams of Palosians, on foot or dashing past in gnuppa-drawn chariots, trundling on two wheels, and driven by men clad in cuirasses and belted with short swords.

He entered a vast court, surrounded by colonnades, reached by sloping inclines and stairs and paved with a dull red stone. Here stood more of the chariots before the doors of this or that office of state. Blue porters moved about it, sprinkling the pavement with cooling streams of water from metal tanks strapped to their shoulders and fitted with a curved nozzle and spraying device.

It made a splendid picture as the sun struck down on the red floor, the gaily trapped gnuppas, the metal of the chariots and the flashing armor on the bodies of those who rode them, or the men at arms who stood here and there about the court, armed with sword and spear. This was the heart of Aphur's life, Croft thought, gave it a glance, and set off in quest of Aphur's king.

HE PASSED through vast chambers of audience, of council, or banqueting and reception, as he judged from the furnishing of each place. He passed other courts, marveling always at the blending of grace with strength in the construction of the whole. Also, he marveled at the richness of the draperies with which various rooms and doorways and arches were hung. Much of it seemed to possess a metallic quality in texture. It seemed like thin-spun gold. Yet it was everywhere about the palace as he passed. Finally he paused. He was getting nowhere. He decided there was but one means of attaining his desire. He put it into force. He *willed* himself into the presence of Jadgor without further search.

Thereafter he was in a room, where, beside a huge wine-red table, two men sat. The one was Prince Lakkon, whom he knew. The other was even a larger man—heavy set, dark of complexion, with grizzled hair, and a mouth held so tightly by habit that it gave the impression of lips consciously compressed. His eyes were dark as those of a bird. His nose high and somewhat bent at the middle of the bridge. The whole face was that of a man of driving purpose, who would brook small hindrance between himself and a predetermined goal.

Aside from that, however, there was little of the king about him since he was clad simply in a loose, white tunic, out of which his neck rose massive, below which his lower limbs showed corded with muscle and strong. Plainly Jadgor was talking state business with his brother-in-law at ease.

As Croft gained the room he struck the table at which he sat with clenched fist. "Cathur must still guard the gateway with Aphur, Prince Lakkon!" he cried. "Let Zollaria plan. Cathur's mountains make her impregnable now as fifty years before. Had Mazhur been other than a low-lying country she had never fallen victim to Zollaria's greed. But Cathur must be assured in her loyalty to the state."

"Her loyalty?" Prince Lakkon exclaimed. "What does Aphur's king mean?"

"What he says." Jadgor set his lips quite firmly. "Scythys is king—a dotard! Kyphallos is what—a fop—a voluptuary, as you know—as all Tamarizia knows. When he mounts the throne—as he doubtless will since there seems none to oppose him—what will Zollaria do? Cathur, since Mazhur was taken, stands alone—secure in her mountains, it is true, but alone, none the less. And Cathur guards the western gate to the inland sea.

"Fifty years ago Zollaria meant to take Cathur as well, and she failed. The capture of Mazhur, save the territorial addition to her borders, gave her nothing at which she aimed. True, she has now a

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seaport at Niera, yet to what end? We hold the gate and the mouths to all rivers opening into the sea. Yet has Zollaria ceased to prate of a freedom of the seas? You know she has not. With Kyphallos on Cathur's throne, will she seek to gain by craft what was denied to her arms?"

"But Kyphallos himself?" Lakkon objected as Jadgor paused.

"Kyphallos!" The heavy shoulders of Aphur's monarch shrugged. "List ye Lakkon! Zollaria is strong. Cathur stands alone. Cathur guards the gate. Aphur could not hold it alone. Think you our foemen to the north have ceased of their ambition or to plan or prepare, while Tamarizia wounded by Mazhur's loss, has licked her wounds for fifty years—and what now? Tamhys— Zitu knows I mean no unjust criticism of a nobleman—is one who believes in peace. So, too, do I, if peace can be enjoyed without the sacrifice of the innate right of man to regulate his own ways of life. Yet were I on the throne at Zitra, do you think I would ignore the possible peril to the north? No! I would prepare to meet move by move should the occasion arise."

"And your first step?" Lakkon asked.

"To make sure of Cathur," Jadgor said.

"How?"

JADGOR leaned toward his companion before he replied. "I would take a lesson from Zollaria herself. Lakkon, we have lived—each state too much in itself. Tamarizia is a loosely held collection of states, each ruled by what—a nominal king and a state assembly? And those assemblies in turn elect the central ruler—the emperor of the nation—to serve for ten Palosian cycles.

"Zollaria is what? A nation ruled by one man and a cycle of advisors, whose word is ultimate law. How was that brought about? By intermarriage—by making the governing house of Zollaria one, bound wholly together by a common interest without regard to anything else save that. Hence, let us make the interests of Aphur and Cathur one, and let us not delay."

"By intermarriage?"

"Aye. With the right princess on Cathur's throne Kyphallos might be swayed, and certainly nothing would transpire without our gaining word."

"You have such an one in mind?" Lakkon asked.

"Aye. I plan not so vaguely, Lakkon. I would give him the fairest maid of Aphur to wife. It would require such to hold a man of his type. Do you know that inside the last cycle he has been seen frequently at Niera, mingling with the Zollarian nobles who come to summer there?"

"So I have heard rumored." Prince Lakkon inclined his head. "But this woman?"

"Your daughter Naia," Jadgor declared.

"Naia! Your sister's own child!" Prince Lakkon half rose from his chair.

"Hilka!" Jadgor waved him back. "Stop Lakkon! She is beautiful as Ga, the mother of Azil. It is because of her Kyphallos comes to Himyra now. I, Jadgor of Aphur, sent him the invitation with this in mind for Tamarizia's good. The betrothal must be agreed upon before he returns. Lakkon, I speak as your king."

Prince Lakkon's face seemed to Croft to age, to grow drawn and somewhat pale as he bowed to his king's command. He looked to Croft, indeed, as Jason knew he himself felt. Never had he seen Prince Kyphallos of Cathur, yet he had heard him mentioned that morning in Lakkon's coach. He had heard Naia's soft lips utter sincere disgust of the lecherous young noble.

Now Naia—the woman he himself loved—was planned a sacrifice to policy of state. Every atom of his soul cried out in revolt—"not that—not that." He might not win her himself, as he very well knew. Yet he had seen her—known her, loved her. A sick loathing evoked by Jadgor's plan waked in his soul. The thought of her surrender to the foul embrace of the northern prince roused within him a rebellion so vast that his senses whirled.

Lakkon rose slowly. His features were dull and his voice a monotone of feeling too deep for an accent of expression.

"King of Aphur, I shall inform the maid that she is chosen a sacrifice," he said. "I know her mind. She loathes this Prince of Cathur in her heart."

"Yet other women have sacrificed themselves to their nation in Tamarizia's history," Jadgor replied.

"I shall place the matter before her in that light," Lakkon informed him, and turned to leave the room.

Croft left, too, flitting out of the palace and once more taking up his own purposeless wandering about the town. Naia, Naia, Naia, his soul cried out within him! Naia, mate of his spirit!—sweet, pure maid of gold. Would that he had a

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body here on the planet of Palos! He would fight this monstrous step, he told himself, to the death! He would seize this golden girl and bear her away—somewhere—anywhere, beyond the reach, the touch of the satyr Prince of Cathur. He would prevent this intended sacrifice of all that was holy in human existence—or die in the attempt!

Here and there he made his way among the life of Himyra, torn by an agony of thought. Dimly he saw where he went—through the stables of the mighty caravans full of the ungainly sarpelcas—through what seemed a market of cattle, where were droves of the long-haired taburs and herds of other creatures like monster sheep save that they had huge pendulous udders, evidently the source of the nation's supply of milk.

He noted these things without being fully aware of the fact at the time. Only later did he recall them as objects beheld before. In a similar fashion he came upon the barracks of troops guarding the various gates in the great wall, entered them, passed through them, found Himyra's weapons no more than strong bows and swords and spears, her soldiery, sturdy looking fellows clad in leathern tunics.

Yet not for one instant did the tumult in his senses cease as he passed from scene to scene. Always was the thought of Naia with him. Always was his spirit hot in revolt against the plan of Aphur's king. And so in the end thoughts of Naia seemed to draw him back in a circuit to Lakkon's palace where was the girl herself.

He reached it and paused outside its doors. They were open. The copper-hued chariot drawn by the four plumed gnuppas stood before them, with Chythron back of the reins.

Bazka, too, stood between the open leaves of the portal, and across the crystal pavement, leading to them, Lakkon was leading Naia toward the coach.

While Jason watched, Aphur's prince and his daughter entered the conveyance and the great doors closed. Chythron spoke to the gnuppas and they sprang into their stride. Quite as he had done that morning Croft entered the carriage and crouched on the padded cushion where Naia already reclined. Where they were going, he did not know. Nor did he care, so long as she lay there before his eyes.

CHAPTER VI

A VIRGIN'S PRAYER

FOR a time as they turned toward the city gate, which they had entered that morning, silence held between Prince Lakkon and his child.

Lakkon broke it himself at last. "All is arranged as you thought best, my Naia?" he inquired.

"Aye, my father." She turned her eyes. "The messengers have departed to the mountains for the snows; the servants are cleaning. I have ordered the tables set in the crystal court, inside the hedge, and I have arranged for a band of dancers and musicians on the appointed day."

"And the robe. You did not forget the new robe?" Lakkon smiled.

Naia shook her head, her eyes dancing. "I am a woman," she replied. "The makers came at my summons to take my measure. It will be ready on the seventh day from this."

"That is well," Prince Lakkon said. But he sighed.

And suddenly Naia's face lost its light and grew sweetly brooding. She stretched out a rounded arm and touched him on the breast. "You are

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tired, my father," she spoke in almost crooning fashion, edging nearer to him. "The day with Uncle Jadgor has left you weary."

"Aye, somewhat," Lakkon confessed. With a swift, yet powerful gesture, he reached out and swept her into his arms, drawing her against his massive chest and sinking his cheek to touch her golden hair. "Naia, my daughter, thou knowest that I love you well," he said.

Croft quivered in his being. It seemed to him he was looking into Lakkon's heart and reading there all his lips held back—the fatherly love, the fatherly pain, attendant on that scene in Jadgor's apartment, where he had spent much of the day. It was that, he felt, inspired that sudden, almost hungry clasping of the girl's supple figure to the father's breast—that almost plaintive cry for her assurance of her faith in his love.

But Naia seemed not to sense any deeper reason than the mere love between them expressed. Her red lips parted, and she laughed softly as she lay against him, lifting a hand to his gray shot hair. "Know that you love me?" she repeated. "Think you I could doubt it? Did you not give me my life? Do we not love what we create—so long as it comes from ourselves?" She nestled her head in the hollow of his corded neck.

Above that gold-crowned head the man's face worked. "We were happy the day of thy birth, thy mother and I," he said.

And now it seemed that at last the woman sensed some trouble unexpressed in the mind of the man. Very gently she released herself and sat up on the padded cushion. Her almost purple eyes looked full into those of her parent. "Concerning what did you speak with Uncle Jadgor to-day?"

"Concerning thee." Lakkon met the issue fairly now that it confronted him at last.

"Concerning me?" To Croft every line of Naia's figure stiffened.

"Aye." Prince Lakkon sat up. He spoke swiftly, briefly, and paused. Yet ere he paused he had fully outlined all King Jadgor planned.

And while he spoke the eyes of the woman widened swiftly, as the iris stretched to leave her pupils deep wells of horror.

Then as Lakkon finished speaking she cried out: "No!" in swift instinctive protest, and lifted herself upon her pink bent knees to poise so an instant before she flung herself once more upon her father's breast. "No!" she cried again, clinging to him. "No, no! Not that—not that! Father, unsay it! Give me not to that beast!"

"Hush!" Prince Lakkon stayed her. "Chythron will hear your outcry."

"Chythron!" she exclaimed. "Not Chythron but all Aphur—all Tamarizia shall hear my outcry against what Jadgor intends—every woman in the nation shall give thanks to Azil and Ga, that she stands not in my place."

"Naia." Her father spoke in a voice not wholly steady.

"Would you profane a shrine, sully a temple, defile a sacred thing?" she flared. "Is a virgin's body a thing to be bartered and sold in Aphur? Does my uncle regard me as a shameless creature who sells herself for a price? Azil and his holy mother would veil their faces from such marriage rites."

"Think not I wish it," her father said. "Yet can I not deny the truth of Jadgor's words, or that the union of the houses of the two states would work for Tamarizia's great good."

Naia was panting. "Tamarizia's?" she faltered now.

"Aye, did you not comprehend what I said concerning the welfare of our nation?" Lakkon asked.

She shook her head. "I—I think horror must have dulled my understanding," she said. "Explain to me again."

Long since they had left the city gates and were following a well-built road which led off toward those mountains where Croft had first stood and viewed the Palosian landscape in the light of this waning day. As he reached the end of his second exposition of the facts, Prince Lakkon turned and suddenly swept aside the purple curtain which draped the side of the coach. He flung out an arm and pointed straight to where the dull red walls of Himyra still shone in the afternoon rays.

"Behold Himyra, jewel on the breast of Aphur," he cried. "There she lies. Think you I would have given ear to Jadgor's plans save for that? Think you I would send you flesh of my loins to such a union save for the good of unborn souls to come? Think you were it not for Himyra, Aphur, Tamarizia herself, I would have bowed my head to the words of Aphur's king? Nay. If so, you are wrong. But for Tamarizia and that glory and honor which are hers and have been for a thousand cycles of our sun, a true son of the nation must sink

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all thoughts of self, must live, if by living he can serve, or should it serve better, must—die!"

DESPITE himself, Croft thrilled at the words, such as only a true patriot might speak in such tones of fire—tones which quivered and pulsed with emotion, one might not deny. In spite of his own sorry rebellion of spirit, echoed, as he now knew, in the soul of the gentle girl before him, some feeling akin to pity for this royal father of hers, crept through his mind. Prince Lakkon was a man torn between parental love and the love of his nation—destined, as it seemed, to suffer, no matter how this thing fell out.

And while he spoke, the girl, his child, flesh of his flesh, crept to his side, to kneel and gaze out at the distant walls of the city she knew as her own. Her expression changed. Some of the indefinable quality of girlhood seemed to fall from her and expose the deeper, firmer woman's nature, as though a veil had been torn aside.

"And I must live for her—with—Kyphallos?" she whispered tensely as Lakkon once more paused.

"If you can win him—hold him—sway him—with Jadgor on the throne at Zitra you will have made Tamarizia strong."

"I — will h a v e m a d e — Tamarizia — strong."

O girl of gold! Croft's heart cried out as he caught her scanning speech. O wonderful woman—so true to womanhood—so true now to the spirit of ultimate woman, ultimate sacrifice through which attribute of woman comes life itself! Unseen, unknown to her or the man who rode beside her, Croft approached and bent above her in that moment of struggle and decision. For, as she turned her eyes back to the interior of the coach, Croft knew she had decided, and that in deciding she had chosen the path which led against every personal impulse of her own clean spirit.

"What am I against Tamarizia?" she said.

"You are my daughter and I love thee," said Lakkon, Aphur's prince.

"I know." Naia crept to him and laid herself in his arms. "I know," she murmured after a time of silence.

Lakkon's arms tightened about her as the coach swung along. Her arm crept up and stole about his neck. Silence came down again save for the patter of the gnuppa's feet on the stone surface of the highway which had now left the plain and begun to scale the mountainside.

Crouched invisible, Croft turned his gaze from the man and woman to stare out between the fluttering curtains.

The road came to an end in a mountain valley, open toward the east and so unveiled a fresh scene of beauty to Jason's eyes.

Here was a country palace, gleaming white above a series of terraced gardens which rose from the shores of a tiny mountain lake. Toward it Chythron guided his steeds along a private drive which branched off from the highway they had traversed thus far.

As though the turning had been a signal, Naia loosened the embrace which held her and sat up, still without speaking, before Chythron brought his team to a stand.

Then, as in the morning, Prince Lakkon helped her to descend and moved beside her up a low, broad flight of steps to reach the portals of their home.

AT THEIR heels Croft followed on. His eyes swept the scope of the valley so far as he could mark it from the steps. Groups of the woolly, sheep-like cattle he had seen in Himyra fed in the lush grass of mountain meadows. Cultivated fields stretched out before his eyes. At the top of the steps he turned briefly and looked off to the east. There his eyes caught the glint of distant sun-kissed water—the Central Sea, of which Prince Lakkon had spoken, he now believed.

Then the portals before which Lakkon and Naia stood swung open, and once more a blue native appeared. Beside him was a monster beast, similar in all respects to those Croft had seen harnessed to the tiny trams in the cargo tunnels. It marked the advent of Lakkon and Naia with a slow wagging of its tail, and,

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suddenly rearing, laid its huge front paws, one on each of the girl's shoulders.

She spoke to the creature softly, and when it dropped back, at her command, she patted its head. Then turning to the man of Mazzer, who stood waiting, she preferred a command: "I am going to my apartments, Miltos; send Maia to me there."

"You will attend me later—over our evening viands?" her father asked.

"Aye, presently," she returned as she moved toward a stair at one end of the entrance court, which, in a smaller way, was not unlike Prince Lakkon's Himyra palace, save that here its pavement was laid in alternate squares of pale yellow and dull red. The treads of the stairway, also, were of yellow and red, as Croft saw while mounting, and the pillars which supported the balcony were yellow, while the balcony itself was red. Here, too, as in the city, a group of white sculpture stood at the foot of the stair. It depicted a very Hercules of a man throttling a creature not far unlike a tiger, while behind him crouched a woman, holding a tiny figure of a child.

All this he saw as Naia ascended without pause, reached a door, guarded by a heavy golden curtain, swept it aside and entered into her own room.

Here, as in Himyra, Croft found couch and chairs, and windows, the mirror basin, the pedestal, and the winged figure poised as though for flight.

Once more the golden curtain was drawn back and a young Mazzer woman appeared.

Naia turned. "Maia, how is the pool?"

"It should be delightful, princess," the blue girl replied. "All this day Zitu warmed it with his light."

Naia tapped with her foot. "Procure fresh raiment and bring it thither," she said. "The ride was tiresome and I will bathe."

Five minutes later, accompanied by Maia, who bore fresh robes, she left the room and led the way to one end of the corridor and through a small door to an outer stair. Descending that she passed through a sort of sunken garden, laid out in odd geometric designs and planted with shrubs and trees and flowers, among which gleamed the white of ornamental urns, fire urns, and statues toward a low, white wall in which an opening appeared. Passing this, she turned about the angle of a protecting inner stone screen and stood on the margin of an open bath, its water clear as crystal and tinted a delicate amber from the yellow bottom and sides of the peculiar onyxlike stone.

Naia bathed. Refusing to spy upon her, Croft waited without the concealing wall, while twilight fell and the sounds of soft splashings came to his ear. The bath took a long time. Croft fancied the girl found some vague comfort in the soft, warm kiss of the waters tempered all day by the sun—that to lie wrapped in their liquid caress soothed somewhat her spirit, torn by the revelations her recent journey had held. While he waited twilight deepened, and after a time a softer light stole through the garden.

He lifted his gaze to the skies. Three moons hung there, casting their blended light over mountain and valley and plain. Vaguely he wondered which of the three he had visited during the night before—that night with its weird experience, ending on the edge of this day which, after all, had been but little less weird—this day in which he had found and recognized and yielded to the one feminine counterpart of his nature, only to find her destined to another less worthy than himself, and to know himself unable to intervene between her and her fate.

WHILE he sat there brooding the whole strange situation—a man in all save material body—a consciousness, suffering all the pangs of spirit, he was unable to physically express, Naia came forth and moved with her accompanying servant, a pure, white figure, through the garden to the house.

Like her shadow, Croft pursued her every step. He stood beside her while she sat waiting for the evening meal. He was behind her when she reclined on the couch beside the table, opposite her father, and ate. He dogged her steps when she once more sought the quiet of her room, and bade Maia leave her for the night.

Hence he witnessed what no other eyes beheld as the flaring oil lamp, with its guttering wick little better than a candle extinguished, and the apartment flooded only by the light of the Palosian moons, she knelt by the mirror basin, before the winged figure on the wine-red pedestal.

And he heard what no other ears save her own could hear as she lifted her hands to the figure, before which she knelt—the cry of her soul—her womanhood's suppliant prayer.

"O, Azil, Giver of Life, must this be

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forced upon me? O Ga, Mother of Azil—thou virgin woman, whom Zitu ordained the one to give an angel life, that he might speak to men of Zitu himself and teach them how to live, do thou intercede for me! Thou knowest woman guards the sacred flame, which is life itself; so that it burns clear and never ceasing. Must that flame in me be fouled? Ga the Mother, Azil the Son—Azil the Angel—hear ye my prayer!"

She ceased and knelt on, silent, with hands clasped and lovely head bowed down.

And once more it seemed to Croft that his senses went spinning, eddying, whirling around. Azil the Giver of Life. Ga the mother of Azil the Son. A Virgin and a Child. And Zitu the father—God. She prayed to them.

This was the Palosian religion, at least, in part. Strange analogy to the earth-creed Croft found it—to the creed in which he had been raised. Zitu was the one creative source here as elsewhere, no matter by what name called—the source to which the projected atoms of its thought looked back, to whom they lifted their voices in praise or prayer.

What did it matter whether on earth or Palos, life was then the same, and the source was one place as another, all-embracing, universal, always the same? And Azil the Angel of Life was what? A Messianic spirit, surely, which had come to speak to the human atoms and tell them of the source. What else? And Ga—the medium, through which spirit was translated into matter—the eternal woman, through whom Life came to the incarnated man.

And to these, this maid—this other woman who had pledged herself as a sacrifice for her nation, prayed. Alone here before the pedestal shrine of Azil, Son of Zitu, she knelt and asked that the cup she had promised to drink might be divinely removed from her lips since all human hope of such a removal seemed to have died in so far as she could know.

Should that prayer go unheeded or unheard? Could the pure cry of a clean spirit fail to reach the listening ears of the source?

No! Croft's spirit cried the word to his soul. No, no! A thousand times no! Somehow, some way, he knew not how that prayer must be heard and answered. He tore himself free from the spell of the kneeling figure, and with no definite purpose in his going save to remove himself from a privacy he felt he must no longer intrude, went blindly out of the room.

CHAPTER VII

KYPHALLOS AND KALAMITA

YET once outside the mountain villa, Croft knew where he wanted to go. It was back to Himyra—back to the palace of Lakkon itself—to be alone with his thoughts. To that point, therefore, he once more willed himself.

The city swam beneath him. The yellow Na sparkled and glinted in the flickering gleams of the fire basins lighted along the embankments as they leaped and flared. Other fires flashed out in various of the public squares. And here the population met for their hours of relaxation. Here groups of wandering musicians played on reed and harp and horn as the gaily decked crowds filed by. Here mountebanks plied their stock of tricks, and acrobats proved their supple agility and strength. Over it all the three moons of Palos poured a silvery light as Croft flitted past.

Then he was at the palace of Lakkon, finding still open, a window of Naia's own room, and so at length the place he sought. The moonlight filtered in. It fell in a broad bank, which struck across the pure white figure of Azil with its outstretched wings.

Through a long moment Croft stood gazing at the statue, bathed in the light of the moons. Then, without removing his eyes, he found the couch and sat down upon it, and thought, still staring at Azil—the material symbol of that spirit to whom the girl, the aura of whose presence pervaded this room, had prayed.

And, after a time, out of all his agony of spirit, his tumult of thought, his rebellion at what was proposed for the girl's fate, the sick knowledge of his own futility to aid her, there came to him a prompting impulse as to his future course. To what end he did not know. In his present state he could do nothing and knew it—had raged at the knowledge ever since he had seen Naia of Aphur on her way to this room, where he now sat.

Yet despite the acknowledged fact of impotency, something seemed to urge him to go on, to learn all he might of Palos and its people, of Tamarizia and its history, its manners and customs, its government and laws, and more particularly the true state of things in Cathur and the truth concerning Kyphallos, son of Cathur's king.

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To Cathur then would he go, Croft decided, while he sat there staring at Azil, the Angel of Life. And Cathur, he judged, lay toward the north since Jadgor had spoken of the state of Nodhur as lying beyond Aphur on the Na. Hence he willed his spirit in projection without further delay.

Thereafter followed a week in which Jason Croft, disembodied spirit, learned much concerning the nation and the country to which he had dared venture across millions of miles of space.

He found Cathur, a mountainous state lying to the north of a wide mountain walled strait. He found Scira, its capital city, not unlike Himyra save that it was built of an odd blue stone quarried from the mountains which ribbed the state in all directions. There was white stone, too, used in the governmental palace, and also in a splendid collection of buildings lying on a small plateau above the city proper. This was the National University of Tamarizia, as Jason quickly learned, once he was inside its walls. Endowed as he was with the peculiar ability of reading the words of the people by reason of his sublimated state, he found this school a wonderful means of quickly gaining all knowledge of the nation which he desired to know.

He literally went to school, an unknown scholar who listened to the recitation of classes and the lectures of grave professorial men clad in long robes of spotless white. Geography held his interest mainly at first. He learned that Tamarizia lay upon a continent holding itself completely surrounded save for the narrow strait, a vast central sea, studded here and there with islands, the major of which, Hiranur, some fifty miles long by twenty wide, was the seat of the imperial throne at the city of Zitra, of which Jadgor had made mention before. The Tamarizian states bordered this central ocean—or had done so before the Zollarian war had wrested Mazhur, on the extreme north shore, from the original group of states.

East of Mazhur lay Bithur. South of that was Milidhur, completing the eastern side of the Central Sea. Aphur joined Milidhur on the west—its name literally meaning "the state to the west," and south of Milidhur and Aphur was Nodhur, gaining outlet for its commerce by means of the river Na.

Cathur lay west of Mazhur, north of the strait, to the outer ocean, completing the circle. Its name might be translated as the battle-ground, which, in fact, it was, Zollaria having more than once sought to conquer it and lost because of the nature of its mountainous terrain. Having learned so much, he could readily see wherein the possession of this state would give Zollaria the freedom of the seas, which she desired, and a joint control of the entire Central Sea.

From geography he turned to sociology and science. He found out quickly that the Tamarizians used a metric system, numbering their population by tens and dividing the national census on the basis of thousands and tens of thousands, each thousand unit having a captain and each ten thousand a local governor. Their day was twenty-seven hours long, their year longer than that of earth, but divided into twelve periods or months, each in their belief ruled over by an angel designated by a symbolic sign.

They believed in the immortality of the soul, as he had learned the first day. They believed in the resurrection of the dead. They used a system of social castes, to which the naturalized descendants of the Mazzerian nations belonged, being purely a caste of the lowest or serving type. The trades of fathers descended to sons, instruction in crafts and arts being largely by word of mouth alone. They had a bard or minstrel caste, a caste of dancers wholly female in its circle.

A Palosian year was called a cycle, a day a sun, a month a Zitran—or period set by Zitu, the national God. There was a priesthood and a vestal order of women. Also, there was an order of knighthood, to which belonged men of noble blood or those raised to it by kingly decree for some signal accomplishment in the arts or sciences or some other service to the state.

THE royal house of each state was hereditary, but governed jointly with a state assembly elected by the vote of each ten thousand unit of population, each unit selecting a state delegate to the assembly. The imperial throne was filled by the choice of the states, as he had once before heard Jadgor, of Aphur, say.

Agriculture was highly held and greatly specialized. Metal working was a very advanced science, as he had already guessed. Copper was abundant, and the Tamarizians held the secret of tempering the metal, now unknown on earth. Of it they made their weapons and most of their public structural metal, includ-

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ing their carriages and chariots and all conveyances of a finer sort. Gold was plentiful, too. But silver and lead were rare and held in high esteem. Steam and electricity were unknown in their application, as Croft had already seen.

They had reached a high plane in art, sculpture and weaving. He discovered that the golden cloth was actually gold spun into threads and mixed with a vegetable fiber to form warp and wool. There was also a medical caste, somewhat crude, but seemingly efficient, so far as he could learn, and attached to it a female or nursing caste, consisting wholly again of women, who entered it from choice. In fact, women, as he came to see, held a prominent place in the nation. They held the right of suffrage. Their citizenship was coequal with their men. They sat in the class-rooms of the university, as he actually saw, and even took part in public ceremonials and competed in the public games.

All in all, before his week at Scira was past, he had come to understand that Tamarizia was a very democratic nation despite its form of royal rulership, and that the emperor of Zitra was little more than a relic of old-time government, with little more power than a republican president.

And that, like most republics, the nation had grown weak in the pursuit of the profession arms, he had to admit that Jadgor was right. Each city had a sort of civic guard—each unit of ten thousand possessed a military police. There was an imperial guard at Zitra of possibly five hundred men. Civic guards, imperial guards and police, the national maximum force none too well armed or trained would not be judged as aggregating over fifty thousand effective men.

To the north of Tamarizia lay Zollaria, her western shore line that of the great or outer ocean. Like Tamarizia, Zollaria was a nation of whites, differing, however, in their national regime and their physical appearance to no small degree. As Jadgor had said to Lakkon, theirs was a rule of absolutism, first and last, with the governing class distinct from the common people in each detail of their life.

Larger than Tamarizia, Zollaria looked with envy on the position of the country to the south. Fifty years before she had sought to change it and failed. Yet Jadgor was assured she had not laid aside her ambition, and Croft was inclined to agree.

The Zollarians themselves were a light-haired race, to a great extent, heavily built, strong, virile, sturdy, many of them blue-eyed, except in the southern part of the nation, where they approached more nearly to the Tamarizian type.

East of Tamarizia and south of Zollaria, in the hinterland of the continent on which the three nations lived, was the half-savage tribe of Mazzer, the blue men, inhabiting a region consisting mainly of semitropic forests and plains, living largely by hunting and the exporting of skins and dried meats and natural fruits, together with a variety of cheese. In these articles they maintained commerce with Zollaria and Tamarizia, along their adjoining borders, and had done so for years. Commerce was entirely by water in such boats as Croft had seen on the Na, and by means of the sarpelca caravans across stretches of desert to regions not approachable by the streams.

That week in school proved a rather peculiar experience to Croft. He came to feel actually at home in Scira. Without being seen or known he came to know the youths of the various classes.

And to one in particular he gave special note. He was a wonderful man in so far as physique was concerned. He stood a good six feet in height and was built in perfect proportion. In the games and sports he always excelled because of his splendid strength. And there he ceased. Mentally he was not the equal of those with whom he strove.

Nature seemed to have left her task uncompleted so far as Jasor was concerned. That was his name—Jasor, from Nodhur, the state to the south of Aphur as Croft learned by degrees. He was a lovable young man, mild-mannered, friendly and kind. But he was rated in his studies with youths two years his juniors and appeared unable to do more than maintain his standing with them. Watching him, Croft felt both pity and interest develop through the course of the seven days wherein he himself acquired so great an understanding of Palosian life.

It seemed a pity to Croft that one so splendidly endowed with physical perfection should be so mentally weak. He rather followed young Jasor about and discovered to his pleasure that although seemingly well provided with means the youth was naturally of a cleanly life. More than that, through association with him, he came to know that Jasor felt

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his position acutely, and was brooding over his own mental capacity to an unwise degree.

THROUGHOUT his stay in Cathur, however, Croft did not lose sight of his main object in coming to the northern state. He had come to find and judge Kyphallos for himself, and he attended to that, not the first night, as he had intended, but the next night after that. There was a reason for the delay. Kyphallos was not in Scira when Croft came to the capital of Cathur. Jason managed to see Scythys the king. He found him in a splendid room clad in a loose robe of scarlet, a senile husk of a once massive man, with a look of vague trouble in his half-blinded cataract-filmed eyes. But of Kyphallos the son there was no sign.

Only by chance remarks was Croft able to learn the whereabouts of the prince. By such means he finally learned of a second palace maintained on an island in the Central Sea, off the coast of Cathur, not far from the border of the former Tamarizian state of Mazhur. The island was known as Anthra, was a part of the state of Cathur, and a favorite retreat with the crown prince.

To Anthra on the second night Croft went. And on Anthra he plunged into such a scene as he had not met in Tamarizia as yet. Heretofore he had been struck with the mild beauty of Palosian life, with a sort of personal dignity which seemed to pervade the nation, despite the magnificence of their public structures and the undoubted wealth of the state.

Not but what, being human, there was a percentage of criminality in the social life. Such things, as among other races, were known and recognized, but he had found it here regulated to a surprising extent.

On Anthra, he came into an atmosphere the antithesis of this, combined with a degree of voluptuous luxury, cradled in a setting of utter magnificence.

He came upon a saturnalia of pleasure. He could liken it to nothing else. A feast was in progress in the palace Kyphallos had made the scene of his private debauches for years.

Above an artificial harbor as calm as glass, the palace rose an imposing pile. At the quays of the harbor their colored sails picked out by flaming fireurns, their gilded hulls set asparkle in the flicker of the light-giving flames, lay a number of elaborate pleasure craft more like gold and copper galleys than anything else.

Steps led up from the stone quays to the palace proper, giving on a wide expanse of crystal flagging, under a heavy portico supported by pillars of lemon-yellow stone. And beyond this through wide airy arches was the main court, in the center of which was a pool of limpid water, some fifty feet long, by as many wide.

Like the other Palosian palaces this central court was the main gathering place of the inmates and guests. On Anthra the structure was flagged in a pale-green stone. The pillars supporting the balcony about it were lemon- yellow, and the stairways at either end of a clear translucent blue. Innumerable oil-lamps lighted it this night, and about one corner of the central pool were arranged the tables for the feast.

Here Croft found the man he sought, reclining on a padded divan, his too full red lips slightly parted in a bibulous smile, his long hair curled and anointed and perfumed till he reeked of aromatic scents; his well-formed hands loaded with rings, his body clad in a crimson garment, embroidered in gold.

Beside him, lying outstretched like some splendid creature of the jungle as it came to Croft, was a woman; tawny as a lioness in the tint of her hair and heavy-lidded eyes, lithe as a lioness, too, in every sensuous line of her body, well nigh unclothed.

Her sandalless feet were stained on the soles with crimson. Anklets gripped her lower limbs, and tinkled tiny golden bells as she moved. Bracelets banded her graceful naked arms. Gem-incrusted cups, fastened by jeweled bands covered in part her breasts. A bit of gold gauze, studded with bright red stones, accentuated rather than veiled the rest of her perfect figure from waist to the bend of her knees. She lay there close to Kyphallos and after a bit she lifted a golden goblet and pressed it to his lips and laughed.

Beyond her was a man, Croft marked at a glance. He was heavy, gross; yet gave an impression of mighty strength in the size of his hairy arms, the pillars of his mighty limbs, the breadth of his shoulder and chest. And he, too, was tawny haired.

And on the other side of Kyphallos was a figure to give Croft pause. A blue warrior sat there; but surely no member of the serving class, Jason thought. This man was never made to serve. His were the features of one who commands,

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stong, firm-lipped, high-cheeked, with almost a somnolent sneer in the expression of his mouth and the glint of his eyes as he turned them on Kyphallos and the woman by his side. This was some Mazzerian chief—here in the palace of Cathur's prince. Who then were the tawny woman and man, Croft asked himself, and found he was soon to know.

For as the woman laughed Kyphallos spoke. "Your laughter is music better than any I can offer, my Kalamita. Since first I heard it in Niera, the time I met you there with your brother, Bandhor, I have longed to hear it more. Your graciousness in coming to this farewell feast, ere I sail for Aphur, burdens me with debt. Yet were I loath to have sailed without a final sight of you—a parting word. And I have provided such entertainment as I might."

"As you do always, Prince of Aphur," his companion responded. "Is it not true, Bandhor, my brother, that we are honored to be present when Cathur desires?"

"Aye. Wine, food, music, and women. What more can a man desire?" the massive individual at whom she smiled over her rounded shoulder replied. "When Cathur returns, he must come to our house at Niera as he has done before. There are others of Zollaria I desire him to meet, as well as other men of Mazzer, besides the noble Bazd, whom we made bold to bring with us tonight."

AS HE finished the blue man smiled, and Kyphallos picking up his own goblet of wine passed it to the Mazzerian with a languid grace. "Thy friends are my friends, O Bandhor of Zollaria!" he exclaimed, and bending close to the face of the girl said: "Shall I come when I return from Aphur?"

And as he gazed upon her the heavy lids slowly contracted until her eyes narrowed to slits. Then they shot up, fully open, and she flashed him a smile. "Aye, my Kyphallos, unless you desire me to suffer, come when you return."

Kyphallos took back the cup from which Bazd, the Mazzerian, had drunk and drained it at a gulp. "I shall come," he shouted and clapped his hands. "Let the entertainment begin!"

After that Croft could only watch and marvel at what he beheld. A sound of harps burst forth. Golden and scarlet curtains drew apart at one end of the immense court. He caught a glimpse of moving figures behind them, and then—fifty dancing girls broke forth.

Swaying, posturing, gesturing they moved down the hall toward the tables. At first they were clothed. But as they advanced they dropped veil after veil from their posturing bodies, until they gleamed white and pink swinging figures, caught in the eddies of the dance. Closer and closer they came. They reached the tables themselves. They sprang upon them. They danced among the remnants of the feast. The hands of the guests—other companions of Cathur's prince, reached toward them—sought to capture them and draw them down upon the divans.

And then the music ceased. Crying aloud the dancers leaped from the table into the pool. Like nymphs they swam across it and disappeared behind a curtain of flowers and shrubs at the farther end. Yet in a moment they were back, dragging what looked like a monster shell in which sat the figure of an aged man, carrying yet another shell in his hand, and wearing a long green robe.

This they launched in the pool, and seizing ropes fastened to it they swam back toward the tables towing it along. At the corner of the pool they clustered on each side, while the aged passenger rose and stepped to land.

Kyphallos rose, too. "Hail Kronhor—Ruler of the Seas!" he exclaimed. "I am about to entrust myself to your domain for a journey to the south. What fare may I expect?"

"Good, O Prince of Cathur," the aged one returned. "I shall instruct all handhaids to wait upon you and steer your ship in safety, even as they have brought me into your presence to-night."

Kyphallos filled a goblet with wine and held it out.

He who played Kronhor took it.

"Drink!" the Cathurian cried. "Cathur does honor to Kronhor—thus."

Kalamita sprang to her feet. She filled other goblets, swiftly motioning the others about the tables to do the same. "Drink!" her voice rang out. "Drink to Kronhor. Drink to Kyphallos and the safety of his voyage."

The toast was drunk. Kronhor made his adieus and was towed back to the other side of the pool. Kalamita was leaning with both hands locked over Kyphallos's shoulder. "Tell me," she whispered. "Why does Jadgor of Aphur ask your presence, my friend?"

"I know not," said the Cathurian prince. "Some business of state, no doubt, to which I must attend for my father, who grows feeble with age as you know."

The dancing girls were hauling the shell from the pool. They made what

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looked like a straining group in pink bisque.

"It was a pretty play," Kalamita murmured. "Did you design it, Kyphallos? I know from the past you are clever."

The man turned and looked once more into her eyes. "I designed it—I planned it to amuse—you."

Croft turned away. He had seen enough. This was the man to whom it was planned to give the woman he—Jason Croft— loved; that sweet, pure Naia of Aphur who had knelt two nights ago in appeal before Azil the Angel of Life. This scented sensualist, caught fast in the charms of a Zollarian woman, of a type Croft could not mistake. Jadgor had hinted at something like this in his talk with Lakkon two days before. And to-night—on the eve of his departure of Aphur, Kyphallos of Cathur sat as the host of the enemies of his land. Surely Jadgor had reason for the fears he had expressed. Surely here was food for serious thought.

CHAPTER VIII

APHUR ACCEPTS

CROFT left the court and made his way outside into the calm beauty of the night. Flooded by the moonlight, he stood watching the flicker of the fire-urns on the waters of the tiny harbor, where lay the gilded pleasure craft.

And after a time he turned back attracted by the fact that the inner lights had died. Only for a moment, however, did he remain inside. In the court, flooded now only by the moons, a wild and loathesome orgy was taking place between the dancing girls and the guests, in and about the pool. Cries, shrill laughter, sounds of splashing and fleeting glimpses of flitting shapes told him the full story as to the end of Kyphallos's feast. It sickened him, and once more he fled the spot to spend the night outside.

Naia! The thought came to him. Suddenly he wanted to see her, be near her, away from this scene of brutal carnival where license reigned supreme. He wanted to be in the hills of Aphur, where she had her home. And swiftly he was. There was Lakkon's palace, white under the triple moons—and here was the window of the room where she had knelt and prayed.

Invisible, yet seeing, he crept inside, like a wraith of the night. Only the moon gave him light. But it showed him the woman of his soul. She lay on the metal couch, asleep. Her fair hair shadowed her face as he bent above her. A slender arm was thrown out to one side. Coverings as light as silk betrayed the grace of her form. Her lips were half parted, and as Jason bent down, she sighed.

Croft straightened and stood like a guardian spirit above her. His soul was once more on fire at the thought of what was planned. This was the girl who was to be offered to the lecherous young spawn of royalty, even now disporting himself with the tawny siren from another nation—that Kalamita, whose name, Croft knew, might best be translated into English as Magnet. Kalamita—the magnet—a human magnet—a female magnet to draw men to her by her shameless charms and bind them fast past any chance of escape.

How much he wondered did Jadgor of Aphur really know of what was going on. How fully was he informed of what was coming now to seem, to Croft, as one side of the workings of Zollaria's plot? Surely he must know how much to be willing to sacrifice this fair young sleeper, his sister's child. Little by little Croft was coming to understand the workings of Jadgor's mind—to believe him a patriot really rather than a seeker of selfish power, such as he had fancied he might be for all his brave words at first.

What then? Croft could not answer. Bound as he was—despite his ability to hear and see and know, he could do nothing in himself. All night long he raved in impotent rage, unknowing that by degrees he was solving the problem presented to him.

At morn he went back to Anthra. He witnessed the departure of Kyphallos in a gilded galley, with red sails and red silken cordage rowed by twenty blue men, ten to each bank of oars.

Kalamita's barge, in which rode the Zollarian woman, her brother and Bazd the Mazzerian chief, accompanied the Cathurian for some two hours before it turned north and made off for Niera, as Croft gathered from what conversation passed.

Kyphallos's craft continued south. Croft let him go. He himself went back to Scira and the national school for his lessons of the day. The Cathurian prince was safe for five days while he sailed and rowed to Himyra. Meanwhile Croft was determined to learn all he could. It was after that he first met Jasor and studied him during the few days remaining until the first meeting between

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Kyphallos and Naia which he had determined to attend. And in so studying the youth, he discovered Jasor's full recognition of his own shortcomings, and that his knowledge of his own backward mental powers was preying upon his mind to produce a melancholic turn in the young man's thoughts.

At night Jasor sat in his quarters brooding, or took long solitary walks. Even in the four days he lost flesh. Croft realized that his introspections were sapping the young Nodhurian's strength—that he was physically as well as mentally sick. He had drawn into himself and no longer took part in the games in which, not only the dares of his classmates, but his very stature, told Croft he had once excelled.

Then came the seventh day, and Croft had willed himself back to Himyra once more, with an eye out for the galley from Anthra along the yellow Na.

He found it a little below the city wall, and followed it as it worked its way up the current with flashing dripping blades which rose and glistened and fell in the brilliant light. Under a scarlet awning, Kyphallos, curled and perfumed, lay on a burnished divan and watched the city slip past until the galley swung into one of the quays in front of the palace, where a chariot accompanied by a part of the royal guard waited as the galley moored. Meanwhile vast crowds lined the terraces along that portion of the Na and trumpets blared a greeting to the northern guest.

The Cathurian came ashore and entered the burnished car. The detachment of the guards fell in on either side. The procession mounted the inclines from terrace to terrace past the gathered throngs, until in the end it passed through the monster entrance of the palace and brought up in the principal court.

There various nobles of the state, Lakkon among them, waited to conduct the visiting noble to Aphur's king. Under their escort Kyphallos moved through the corridors and across courts to where, in an audience-room of huge proportions, Jagdor sat in state.

Here his guard of honor drew aside and left the prince standing alone as Jadgor rose.

"WELCOME Cathur, to such poor hospitality as is mine," said Aphur's king.

"Hail Aphur," Kyphallos replied, bowing in the least degree. "Cathur sends greeting through me, his son."

Jagor descended a step of the dais on which he sat. He put out a hand. "Ac-

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cept a seat beside me, son of Cathur, whose presence gladdens the eye," he went on.

Kyphallos advanced, clasped palms with the Aphurian king, mounted the steps and seated himself on the gilded divan where Jadgor had sat alone.

The king of Aphur turned to two guards stationed on either side. "Announce that Cathur is Aphur's guest."

"Cathur is the guest of Aphur!" proclaimed the soldier heralds.

This completed the ceremonial of the royal arrival and the nobles withdrew with the exception of Lakkon, who, at a sign from Jadgor, remained and approached the dais.

Jadgor waved away his guards. "I would speak with you on matters of weight, O Cathur," he said when the three were alone.

"I give ear, King of Aphur," Kyphallos replied.

Like the man of purpose he was Jadgor did not waste time in airy persiflage. "Cathur guards the western gate with Aphur, Kyphallos," he began. "To my mind it occurs the guards are bound by a common interest. It occurs to me to strengthen the tie."

"To what end?" A slight frown grew between the younger man's eyes. He seemed like one taken suddenly by surprise and his words came only after a perceptible pause.

"To the end of strengthening our nation," Jadgor shot out his reply. "In one year Tamhys's reign is done, unless he be reelected, as you know. With Cathur's help and that of Nodhur, which is well assured, and support from Milidhur already promised, Aphur can win the day."

"Ah!" Suddenly Kyphallos smiled. And as swiftly his eyelids drew together. "But what," he asked, "if Cathur should look toward Zitra as well?"

Like a stab of light a thought pierced Croft's listening brain. Was that it—was that the bait Zollaria held forth? Kyphallos on the throne of Tamarizia—not for ten years, but for life—Zollaria and Tamarizia practically one if not actually united—Cathur in Zollaria's hands and Kyphallos a noble of a vast empire—a dual monarchy such as Palos had never seen. The conception from the standpoint of royalty at least was no less than magnificent.

Jadgor, too, gave his companion a piercing glance. "Could Cathur win without Aphur?" he asked.

Kyphallos shrugged. "My words were but a question," he evaded the answer direct. "What does Aphur propose?"

"An alliance of their houses," Jadgor said and paused.

And once more Kyphallos frowned without reply. Plainly he was giving this matter consideration.

Jadgor resumed. "It is in our minds to offer you the fairest flower in Aphur's garden of women to this end."

"Hai! A woman! Thou meanest marriage?" Kyphallos cried.

"Aye."

Kyphallos smiled. "And this wonderful woman—who is she?"

"The daughter of Prince Lakkon here," Jadgor declared. "Naia, the child of my sister, more beautiful than any girl in Aphur and pure as the Virgin Ga."

"Naia!" Kyphallos's eyes lighted. "I have heard of her, O Aphur. It would seem you plan to make this alliance strong."

"The guard of the western gate should be strong," Jadgor said.

Kyphallos nodded. "Yet have I never seen her," he remarked in a tone of musing, "though the fame of her beauty has reached Cathur ere this. I have heard she has hair like spun gold and eyes as purple as the twilight in the mountains. Is this true?"

"Cathur shall judge the truth for himself," Jadgor made response. "Prince Lakkon craves the presence of Kyphallos at a feast to-morrow night. The maiden shall be there."

"Good." Once more Kyphallos smiled. Women were his main interest in life. "I have never given serious thought to marriage, yet it can do no harm to see this fairest of Aphur's maids. Say to Prince Lakkon that Cathur shall do himself the pleasure to accept his invitation to a feast. As for the rest—" He shrugged. "A man, O Jadgor, should never marry in haste. I must think upon your words."

There was something in the Cathurian's mind. Croft tried to read the secret thought, and failed. Jadgor, too, seemed to sense some reason beyond the one assigned for the man's hesitation, although an immediate answer was hardly to have been expected to such a proposition as that by which the prince was faced.

And Jadgor did not seek to press the matter further. Instead, he turned to Lakkon with a request to escort the royal guest to the rooms prepared against his coming, and rose from his seat.

CROFT sought Prince Lakkon's palace without more delay.

He found it receiving the finishing touches of preparation for the Cathur-

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ian's entertainment, and Naia, with her own maid beside her, supervising the hangings of fresh draperies in the huge central court.

His soul quickened at sight of her and then sank as he saw the expression of her face. It was an expression of deliberate endurance, and he recalled how nights before she had sighed in her sleep.

Yet he hovered near her and after hours Lakkon himself arrived and came to her side. Father and daughter sat upon one of the carved and gilded seats with which the court had been set forth.

Naia looked into Lakkon's eyes. "What said the Cathurian to Jadgor's proposal?" she inquired.

"He accepted our invitation for the night after this," Lakkon replied. "He seems a cautious man. He would see you before he decides."

"He would see me!" Naia of Aphur flashed. "He would view me—learn if I please his royal fancy—Zitu! must I submit to this?"

"Nay." Lakkon shook his head. "Cathur's prince was but gaining time to consider all sides of the case. Jadgor's offer took him by surprise."

"Perhaps," said Naia in almost eager fashion, "he does not wish a wife."

Lakkon shook his head again. "Scythys, his father, is old. Kyphallos must marry when he gains the throne at latest. Is everything prepared?"

"Aye—even to—the sacrifice." Naia's tone was bitter. She rose and moved away without more words, mounting the stairs toward her rooms.

Croft's heart was bitter, too, as he left the place and returned by his will to Scira and the apartment of Jasor of Nodhur.

Just why he went there he hardly knew—save that the sympathy he felt for the soul-sick youth seemed to keep the boy in his mind. Yet once in his presence he found the youth sitting before an untouched plate of food. And after a time he hurled this to the floor and buried his head in his hands, to break into muttered speech.

Croft listened and after a time he found the cause. Jasor's father had sent him word to come home. The two leaves of a writing tablet—bits of thin metal covered with hardened wax, in which characters were cut with a metal stylus, lay unbound and spread out on the table where the food had sat. Jasor's father had evidently become convinced that his son was a dullard and was wasting his time in seeking to learn more than he already knew.

Croft remained with him during the night. For a time he whimpered and cursed. Later he destroyed the tablets as he had destroyed his food. After that he flung himself on his couch and for hours he dozed and waked and tossed and muttered. Croft fancied him in a fever from the broken nature of the words he spoke. And in the morning the boy did not rise. The woman of whom he rented his lodgings came to clean and found him muttering and mouthing. He sprang up and drove her from the room. She ran crying down-stairs and out to the street and along it for some distance to a house where quite evidently one of the nursing caste lived.

Presently a woman in the uniform of her calling, a short blue-skirted costume, embroidered with a red, heart-shaped symbol came forth and followed her back to her house. Five minutes after her arrival she had sent the old woman for a doctor and was herself bathing Jasor's flushed neck and face.

The doctor came, examined the patient, left some liquid substance to be given in interval doses and went away. Croft remained till evening. Jasor was more quiet by then, and he left. But, physician as he was, he felt that the young Nodhurian's days were numbered, that unless he had the will to recover he would sink slowly and die in the end. And he knew Jasor had not the will to get well.

His own will carried him to Himyra in a flash, and to Lakkon's palace at once. Night had fallen when he reached it and the central court was a blaze of light from a myriad of oil-lamps. In the main expanse of the crystal flooring the tables were set forth, decked with flowers and loaded with viands. Serving men and maidens of the blue Mazzerian race were still at work in the final preparations. Of Naia or Lakkon there was no sign.

The latter came down the stairs at one end after some time, however, and signing to Bazka, the Mazzerian *major-domo*, took up a place near the massive doors. There he remained until a clatter of hoofs marked the first arriving guests.

THEY came in a stream thereafter, nobles of Aphur and their daughters and wives; captains of the civic guard, and finally, with a blare of trumpets from riders mounted on gnuppas, Jadgor himself and Kyphallos in a golden coach drawn by eight gnuppas harnessed four abreast.

And still Naia had not appeared. But

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as the King of Aphur and the Prince of Cathur moved down the crystal pave from the doors toward the tables in the center of the court, she came slowly down the stairs.

Croft stared in delight. She was a thing of purple and gold. The gown she had described that first day wrapped her supple form like a second skin, from right shoulder to hip, and fell from there to the knees. It was a shimmering thing embroidered in purple stones.

Halfway down the stairs she stood and inclined her head, while Jadgor and Kyphallos paused. Then as the men advanced she began again to descend, until near the head of the tables she sank on her left knee and bowed before the king.

Jadgor's own hand helped her to rise. Jadgor made Kyphallos known. Prince and princess touched hands. Lakkon led toward the feast.

At the head sat Jadgor and Kyphallos side by side. Lakkon reclined beside the king. Naia's place was on the Prince of Cathur's left. Blue servants in Lakkon's livery placed the other guests and began their service at once.

For an hour the feast went on. Hidden musicians filled the air with the sound of their harps. That snow-chilled wine, of which Lakkon had spoken, poured from golden pitchers into goblets of silver as serving-maids passed up and down the board to keep all well supplied.

Croft noted Kyphallos more closely than the rest. He had seen the swift lighting of his eyes when Naia appeared on the stairs; the swift instinctive parting of his too full lips, the twitch of his nostrils, accompanying that first glance of the maid suggested for his wife.

Now, as he lay on the divan, he found him watching her with what seemed a steady interest, plying her with gallant conversation, finding excuse to frequently touch her hands, staring into her long-lashed purple eyes. With his resentment for the Cathurian growing by swift leaps and bounds, he realized that Kyphallos was impressed, sensed that before this chaste beauty of his own people, he had forgotten Zollaria's magnet for the time.

Also he thought it had been better had the wine been less nicely chilled, for Kyphallos drank deep and his eyes began to sparkle as time passed with new toasts proposed and drunk about the board. It came to Croft that Cathur's prince was losing his head at a time when he had better have kept it, as his voice became more and more loud.

Intoxication may be very well on Anthra, where it was the accepted thing. In Himyra and the palace of Lakkon, before his proposed bride, it might prove another thing. He was strengthened in his belief by the questioning glance Naia cast at the northern noble from time to time—a glance of something like surprised dismay.

The harps struck up a different measure toward the last. Golden curtains parted under the balcony, near the stairs. A band of dancing girls trooped in. They were things of beauty, laughing faced, their soft hair flowing, clad in what seemed no more than garlands of flowers twined about their slender bodies and half-way down their limbs. Beginning to dance they advanced and as they danced they sang. The scene became one of rhythmic beauty, delightful to the senses. Each girl bore a parti-colored veil of gauze and waved it as she moved. Massed inside the rectangle of the tables on the crystal floor, they seemed to be a very dancing, nodding bed of flowers, amid which twinkled their flying feet and gesturing arms, beating time to the pulse of the harps.

Then it was done. The dancers were drawing back with graceful genuflections, as applause broke forth from the guests. Lakkon tossed a handful of silver pieces among them. Jadgor cast a double handful of jewels into the scarf of a maid who advanced at his sign.

"Divide them among you," he said.

The girl sank to the floor, and rose.

"HOLD!" cried Cathur's prince. His face was flushed and his eyes shone with an unholy light. Croft saw his nostrils fairly quiver as he watched the lissom dancer. He lifted himself and struck the table. "Up!" he commanded thickly. "Up beauteous maid."

With a glance at Jadgor, who made no sign whatever, the dancing girl obeyed. She stood on the table before Kyphallos.

"Unveil!" he said.

Again the woman glanced at Aphur's king. But Jadgor did not draw back from the situation invoked by his bibulous guest. Too much hung on the moment as Jadgor saw it to quibble over the uncloaking of a dancer. "Unveil!" he added his command.

The girl lifted her hands. Her garlands fell away. She stood a lithely rounded form, her feet lost in the mass of blossoms she had worn.

Kyphallos laughed. His eyes were

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"Thou beast!" cried Naia, flinging her glass upon the table. "'Tis thus I drink your toast, Kyphallos!"

blazing. He caught up a goblet of wine and rose. "Hail Adita, goddess of womanly beauty," he exclaimed. "Now, are you perfect as you stand revealed, stripped of the silly trappings which concealed the greater charms beneath. Flowers are things of beauty in their place, but —woman unadorned is the fairest flower of life. Arise, my friends, and drink with me to woman as she is, this new Adita I have found!"

They rose at Jadgor's sign, though Croft caught more than one glance of question passing among the guests.

So much he saw and turned back to Naia who had risen, too, her face a mask of outraged dignity and scorn.

Kyphallos lifted his goblet and set it to his lips.

Naia lifted hers and cast it from her so that its contents spilled and flowed across the table at the dancer's feet.

"Thou beast!" her voice came in tones of sharp displeasure. "Thou sensuous offspring of Cathur! 'Tis thus I drink your toast!"

Silence came down—a breathless pause about the tables.

Kyphallos lowered his cup and turned toward the Princess of Aphur slowly.

And suddenly the Cathurian smiled. He replaced his goblet on the table and sank to one knee before the haughty daughter of his host. "By Zitu!" his voice rang out; "but you are truly royal. You are magnificent, daughter of Aphur. Did I pick me a lesser toy, 'twas but that I knew you for what you are—one fit to

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be a queen. Naia of Aphur, wilt pledge yourself queen of Cathur's throne?"

The words were out. Croft felt his senses sink. Yet even so he saw the whole psychology of the event. To Cathur, the maiden offered, had seemed but an easy prize—to take at his pleasure, if at all. To Cathur drunk the dancer had appealed. To Cathur still drunk Naia of Aphur, offended, angered, hurling her scorn in his teeth, appeared suddenly not a thing to be taken lightly, but a beautiful consort to be won if taken at all.

On Jadgor's face was a satisfaction unvoiced. He rose and lifted his hands. "My lords and ladies," he announced, "I call you to witness that Cathur asks the hand of Aphur's princess. Let Naia choose."

Kyphallos drew himself up and folded his arms. To Croft it seemed the man was sobered by Jadgor's words. Yet as cries of assent and acclamation rang out through the court, he remained silent before the tense figure of the girl.

And slowly the golden head beneath the curling plume of purple bowed. One bared arm rose and extended its fingers toward the northern prince. "Aphur accepts." Her words came scarcely above a whisper and were drowned in a greeting roar of voices upraised by the waiting guests.

Cathur caught the extended hand and turned to the forward straining faces, the watching eyes.

"A happy consumation to our feast," rang the words of Aphur's king. "Men and women of Aphur this shall be arranged. I, Jadgor, myself shall sponsor the formal betrothal on a day one twelfth of a cycle hence."

The thing was done. A month from to-night would see it ratified. A sick impotency filled Croft's soul as once more cries of approbation greeted the promise of the king. And into the midst of his despair there flashed one ray of blinding thought. Before it he staggered, drew back, shaken in the primal elements of his being. Yet he did not put it aside. He held it. He marveled at it. And suddenly taking it with him, he left the scented atmosphere of Lakkon's palace court and rose up toward the heavens, studded with stars.

To earth! His will gathered, centered, focused by the wonder of the thing he had conceived cast all its driving power into the demand. Palos and all it held sank swiftly away beneath him. He opened the eyes of the form he left on his library couch.

CHAPTER IX

'TWIXT EARTH AND HEAVEN

NOTHING had been disturbed. Everything was as he had last seen it, save that a layer of dust had collected, thanks to the absence of Mrs. Goss, and that due to the difference of the length of the Palosian day. Nine terrestrial days had passed since Croft had lain his body on the couch.

Rising slowly, he ignited the flame of a small alcohol-lamp and quickly brewed himself a cup of strong beef-extract, which he drank. The hot beverage and the food put new physical life into his sluggish veins, as he knew it would. Seating himself in a chair, he gave himself over to a consideration of the thought he had brought with him from Palos—a thought more weird than any of which he had ever dreamed.

Briefly, Croft had conceived of a way to acquire a physical life on Palos. That was his unheard-of plan, the possibility of which had wakened in his consciousness as Jadgor announced the formal betrothal of Naia to Kyphallos at the end of the month. It was that that had sent him back here to his study and his books.

And after a bit he rose and drew a volume from a case and brought it back to the desk. It was a work dealing with obsessions—that theory of the occulist that a stronger spirit might displace the weaker tenant of an earthly shell, and occupy and dominate the body it had possessed.

He read over the written page and sat pondering once more while the night dragged past. Even as he had gone a step farther in astral projection, carrying it into spirit projection as a further step, so now he was considering a step beyond mere obsession, and questioning whether or not it were possible for a spirit, potent beyond the average ego of earth, to enter and revivify the body laid down by another soul.

His thoughts were of Jasor as he sat there wrapped in thought. The young Nodhurian was dying, unless Croft's medical knowledge was all at fault. Yet he was dying not from disease in the physical sense. His body was organically healthy. It was his soul which was sick unto death. And—here was the wonderful question: Could Croft's strong spirit enter Jasor's body as Jasor laid it aside and, operating on the still inherent and reasonably sound cell-energy still contained within it, possess it for its own?

It was an amazing thought—a daring

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thought—yet not so far beyond the spirit which had dared the emptiness of the unknown in the adventure which had brought Croft to his present position, thereby inspiring the thought itself. Day broke, however, before Croft made up his mind.

He realized fully that he must remain on earth for a day or two to provide his present body against another period of trance. He realized also that in the experiment he meant to make he might lose that earthly body and fail in his other attempt at one and the same time. But he made up his mind none the less.

Should he succeed, he would live as an inhabitant of Palos—would be able to physically stand between Naia—the one woman of his soul—and her fate—and, winning, be able perhaps to claim her for himself. Against the possibility of such a consummation to his great adventure no argument of a personal peril held weight.

Croft sent for Mrs. Goss, telegraphing her shortly after it was light. He spent the day waiting her arrival in feeding his body with concentrated foods. He met her when she came, and for a week life went on in the Croft house as it had gone on before. Then Croft summoned the little woman and bade her sit down in one of the library chairs. He told her he was engaged on a wonderful investigation of the forces of life. He made her understand dimly he was doing something never attempted before, which, if it succeeded, would make him very happy. He explained that he was about to take a long sleep—that it would last for three, and possibly four days. He forbade her to disturb his body during that time, or to touch it for a week. Then, if he was not returned and in his sane mind, she might know that he was dead.

With quivering lips and wide eyes and apron-plucking hands, she promised to obey. Croft sensed her anxiety for himself, and tried to be very gentle as he saw her from the room.

But with the door closed behind her, he moved quickly to the couch and stretched himself out. For a moment he lay staring about the familiar room. Then into his mind there came a thought of Naia—and of Jasor—of love for the one and pity for the other. He smiled and fastened his mind on the object of this present attempt. And suddenly his eyelids closed and his body relaxed. Once more time and space suffered annihilation, and he knew himself in Jasor's room.

It was full. The nurse was there, and the physician. And there was another—a young man with a strong, composed face, clad in a tunic of unembroidered brown, whom Croft recognized as a priest.

He stood by the couch on which Jasor lay, pallid as wax, with closed lids, and a barely perceptible respiration. He held a silver basin in his hands, and as Croft watched he sprinkled the face of the dying youth with his fingers dipped in the water it contained. A quiver of emotion shook Croft's spirit. He had returned to Palos none too soon.

The priest drew back. The doctor approached the bed. He lifted the wrist of Jasor and set his fingers to the pulse. In a moment he laid it down, and bowed his head. And as he did so, Jasor sighed once deeply like one very tired.

"He passes," the physician said.

PRIEST, nurse, and physician all saw it. But Croft saw more than they. He saw the astral form, the soul-body of Jasor, rise from the discarded clay. And swiftly casting aside all other considerations, he willed his own consciousness into the vacant brain.

Thereafter followed an experience, the most terrible he had ever known. He was within Jasor's body, yet he was chained. For what seemed hours he fought to control the physical elements of the fleshy form he had seized. And always he failed. In some indefinable way it seemed to resist the new tenant who had taken the place of the old. Croft describes his own sensations as those of one who presses against and seeks to move an immovable weight.

He suffered—suffered until the very suffering broke down the bonds in a demand for some outward expression. Then, and only then he knew that the chest of the body had once more moved, and that he had drawn air into the lungs. Encouraged, he exerted his staggering will afresh, and—he knew he was looking into the faces above him—through Jasor's physical eyes!

"He lives!"

With Jasor's ears he heard the physician exclaim:

"This passes understanding, man of Zitu. He was dead, yet now he lives again!"

"The ways of Zitu oft pass the understanding, man of healing," said the priest, advancing to the bed. "What is man to understand the things that Zitu plans?"

Croft thrilled. Coordination between his conscious spirit and the body of the

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man of Palos was established. He had won again—won a visible, material existence on the planet with the woman he loved. The thought brought a sense of absolute satisfaction; he closed the lids above Jasor's eyes, and slept.

For several hours he lay in restful slumber, then awoke refreshed. His deductions had been correct. Jasor's body was healthy, aside from the weakening influences of his spirit. Given a strong spirit to dominate it now, and it responded in full tide.

He glanced about. It was night. By the dim light of an oil-lamp he saw two persons in the room. One was the nurse. The other was the priest. They appeared to converse in lowered tones.

"Man of Zitu," Croft spoke for the first time with his new-found tongue.

The priest rose and hurried to him. "My son."

"I am much improved," said Croft. "In the morning I shall be almost wholly well."

"It is a miracle," the priest declared, holding his forearms horizontally before him until he made a perfect cross.

A miracle! Croft considered the words. They carried a sudden meaning to his mind. Truly the priest had spoken rightly. This was little short of a miracle indeed, did the other know the facts. Swiftly Croft formed a plan. "Father, what is your name?" he inquired.

"Abbu, my son."

Croft turned his eyes. "Send the nurse away. I would talk with you alone."

The priest spoke to the woman, who withdrew slowly, her face a mingled mask of emotions, chief among which Croft read a sort of awed wonder.

"Why does she look at me like that?" he asked.

The priest seated himself on a stool beside the couch. "I said your recovery was a miracle, my son," he replied. "I am minded that I told the truth. You have changed, even your face has changed while you slept. You are not the same."

Croft felt his muscles stiffen. He understood. The new spirit was molding the fleshy elements to itself—uniting itself to them, knitting soul and body together. The experiment was a success. He smiled. "That is true, Father Abbu," he replied. "I am not the same as the Jasor who died."

"Died?" The priest drew back. His eyes widened.

"Died," repeated Croft. "Listen, father. These things must be in confidence."

"Aye," Abbu agreed.

Croft told what had occurred.

ABBU heard him out. At the end he was seized by a shaking which caused him to quiver through body and limbs.

"Listen, father," Croft said. "I am not Jasor, though I inhabit his form. Yet I know something of him, and of Tamarizia as well. Jasor had a father."

"And a mother." The priest inclined his head.

Croft had gained information, but he did not make a comment upon it then. "To them I must appear still as Jasor," he returned.

"They are looked for in Scira," Abbu declared. "We hoped for their coming. Why have you done this thing? Are you good or evil?"

"Good, by the grace of Zitu," said Croft. "I come to help Tamarizia. Think you I could have come had not Zitu willed?"

Suddenly the face of the young priest flamed. "Nay!" he cried, and rose to stand by the couch. "Now my eyes are open and I see. This thing is of Zitu, nor could be save by his will. It is as I said, a miracle indeed." Again he lifted his arms in the sign of the cross.

"Then," said Croft, striking quickly while the man was lost in the grip of religious fervor. "Will help me to do that for which I came—will help me to help Tamarizia should the need arise?"

"Aye." To his surprise Abbu sank before him on bended knees. "How am I to serve him who comes at the behest of Zitu in so miraculous a way?"

"Call me Jasor as in the past," decided Croft. The name was near enough to his own to fit easily into both his ears and mouth. "Yet think me not Jasor," he went on. "Jasor was a dullard, weak in his brain. Soon shall I show you things such as you have never dreamed. Think you I am Jasor or another indeed?"

"You are not Jasor," said the priest.

"Nay—by Zitu himself, I swear it," said Croft. "Go now and send back the nurse. Say nothing of what I have told you. Swear silence by Zitu, and come to me every day."

"I swear," Abbu promised, rising, "and—I shall come, O Spirit sent by Zitu." He left the room backward and with bowed head.

Croft let every cell of his new body relax and stretched out. He closed his eyes as he heard the nurse return, and gave himself up to thought. It appeared to him that he had made a very good beginning and won an ally in Abbu, into

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whose astonishment he had woven a thread of the man's own religion to strengthen his belief. Now it remained to gain utter control of the body he possessed — to master it completely, and make it not ony responsive to his physical use, but to so impregnate it with his own essence that he might leave it for short times at least in order to return to the earth.

And to accomplish that he had just four days. Lying there apparently asleep, he sought to exercise that control he possessed over the body now lying on his library couch. And he failed. Strive as he might, he could not compass success. In something like a panic he desisted after a time and sought to fight back to a balanced mental calm.

Was he trapped? he asked himself. Was he a prisoner of the thing he had sought to make his own? Reason told him the question was folly—that already the body was responding in a physical sense. In the end he decided to take a longer time in his endeavors, and so at last fell into a genuine sleep.

From that he awakened to the sound of voices, and turned his eyes to behold a woman past middle age, with graying hair, and a man, strongly built, with a well-featured face, in the room.

Working swiftly, his mind recalled Abbu's words concerning Jasor's parents. The priest had said they were expected in Scira. This woman, then, must be the Nodhurian's mother.

He opened his lips and called her by that word.

She ran to him and sank her knees by the couch. "Jasor, my son!" she cried in a voice which quavered, and as the man approached more slowly, turned her face upward to meet his eyes. "He knows me, Sinon—he knows me," she said.

"Aye, Mellia, praise be to Zitu. Jasor, my son, dost know me also?" the Nodhurian's father said.

"Aye, sir," said Croft, marking his parents' names. "But—how come you in Scira?"

"Did we not write that we should arrive and take you with us on our return?" Sinon asked.

Croft saw it in a flash, and the slip he had made. This explained Abbu's assertion that they were expected. The tablets hurled to the floor by Jasor had been deciphered after his illness, it appeared. "Aye," he admitted somewhat faintly. "But—I have been ill."

"And are recovered now," he who was to be his father said.

"Aye. Had I my clothing I could rise."

"We shall return then at once," Sinon declared.

But Mellia, the mother, broke into protests, and Croft became much more cautious, spoke for delay. He did not wish to undertake a trip to Nodhur before he had returned to earth. That was necessary if he was to protect his earth body from Mrs. Goss at the end of the week, since now he knew he must have more time. He determined to make another attempt at escape from his new body, when he would appear merely to be asleep.

And he succeeded late that night, freeing himself and once more rousing on the library couch. He did several things at once. He examined his own body and found it sound. He wrote a note telling his housekeeper he had returned and gone away for at least a month. He knew many a body had been kept entranced for longer periods by the Indian adepts of the East, so did not fear the attempt.

Next he crept up-stairs to his former bedroom and packed a suitcase, carrying it to one of the several spare rooms seldom used and always kept closed. Locking himself into this room, he opened the window slightly to assure a supply of air. He had told Mrs. Goss to remain at the house or go to her daughter's, as she preferred, until his return. He felt assured he would be undisturbed. Laying himself on the bed, he once more satisfied himself that all was as he wished it, and returned to Jasor's room.

CHAPTER X

WHOM ZITU CHANGED

DAWN was breaking on Palos as he opened his eyes. The nurse dozed not far from his couch. He waked her and demanded his clothing. She brought it in some doubt and assisted him to put it on. Ten minutes later he sat on the edge of the couch a Palosian in all physical seeming. Yet the woman regarded him still in a more or less uncertain fashion.

Croft smiled. "Thank you for your kindness, my nurse," he said. "I shall ask my father to remunerate you for it. Now I would eat."

She nodded and hurried from the room, to return with food. Hardly had Croft disposed of the meal with a zest evoked of his physical needs, that Sinon of Nodhur appeared.

Croft rose and stood as the man came in. "We return home to-day, my father," he declared.

Sinon seemed embarrassed before the words of his son. "Aye, if you wish," he

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made answer after a pause. "Sit you, my son. We must speak together. Your sickness has wrought changes within you. You are not the Jasor to whom I wrote it were useless to remain in Scira. The glance of your eye, the sound of your voice, even the lines of your face, have changed."

Croft smiled. "That is true," he agreed. "Yet even so it is of small value to remain in Scira, since now I know all and more than the learned men can teach me, were I to linger among them for many more cycles that I have."

"Zitu!" Sinon regarded him oddly. "My son, is this change to make you a braggart intead of a dullard?" he began slowly after a time.

"Not so," Croft returned. "My father, I am as one born anew. I shall prove my words, yet not until I have returned to our home. Let us begin the journey this day."

"It shall be as you wish," Sinon said, and left the room.

Later Abbu came and was admitted. To him Croft explained that he was going south to Nodhur with his father. He went further and questioned the priest concerning Sinon himself, learning that he was a wealthy merchant, residing in Ladhra, capital of the southern state.

The information was a considerable shock to Croft. The merchant caste, while exercising great influence and weight in Tamarizian affairs, were not of noble blood. Hence now, at the very beginning, he found himself confronted by a gulf of caste separating him from Naia of Aphur hardly less completely than before he had made Jasor's body his own. For a moment the thought occurred to him that he had chosen that body rather badly. Then his natural determination came to his aid, and he set his lips as he resolved to find a way to win to Naia's side.

Abbu rather drew back before the gleam which crept into his eyes. "Jasor, since I know you by no other name," he cried, "wherein have I given offense?"

Croft laughed. He rose and flexed his arms and stared into Abbu's face. "In nothing; I was but thinking," he made answer. "Abbu, give me tablets to the priesthood at Himyra, stating those things you have seen."

Abbu nodded. "You stop at Himyra?" he said.

"Aye." The first step of winning to the woman of his soul flashed into Croft's brain, even as his plan for winning a body had flashed there days before.

But he kept it to himself, locked safely in his breast, as he set forth for his new home, with his parents, Sinon and Mellia, that afternoon.

That Sinon of Nodhur was wealthy he was assured when he saw the galley in which the homeward journey was to be made. It was a swift craft, gilded and ornate as to hull and masts and spars. Ten rowers furnished power on its two banks of oars, seated on the benches in the waist of the hull. Behind them were the cabin and a deck under an awning of the silklike fabric, a brilliant green in hue. Not only did all this show Croft his supposed father's financial condition, but he learned from Sinon that he was owner of a fleet of merchant craft which plied up and down the Na, and across the Central Sea. In addition, the largess Sinon bestowed on the nurse was evidence of a well-filled purse.

ALL these things Croft considered in the intervals of conversation with Sinon and Mellia while the galley ran south. In his boyhood Jason had been possessed of a natural aptitude for mechanics. In later manhood he had owned and operated his own automobiles, making most of the repairs upon the cars himself. Learning now of his father's line of business, it occurred to him to revolutionize transportation on Palos as a first step toward making his name a word familiar to every tongue.

To this end he approached Sinon the first evening as he and Mellia reclined on the deck.

"My father," he said, "what if the trip to Ladhra could be shortened by half?"

"Shortened, in what fashion?" Sinon asked, turning a swift glance toward Croft.

"By increasing the speed."

Sinon smiled. "The galley is the best product of our builders," he replied.

"Granted," said Croft. "But were one to place a device upon it, to do the work of the rowers with ten times their strength?"

"Zitu!" Sinon lifted himself on his couch. "What, Jasor, is this? What mean you, my son? What is this device?"

"One I have in mind," Croft told him. "Come. You make your money with ships. Apply some of it to making them more swift of motion. Let me make this device, and they shall mount the Na more swiftly than now they run with the current and the wind."

Sinon turned his eyes to the woman at his side. "And this is our son, who was a dullard!" he exclaimed.

"In whom I always have had faith,"

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Mellia replied with a smile of maternal joy on her face.

"You have faith in this thing he proposes?" Sinon went on.

"Aye. I think Zitu himself spoke to him in his deathlike sleep," the woman said.

"Then, by Zitu—he shall make the attempt!" Sinon roared. "Should he succeed, the king himself would make him a knight for his service to the state."

Croft's heart leaped and ran racing for a minute at the words. Knighthood! That was the answer to the question in his brain—the bridge which should cross the gulf between Naia of Aphur and himself. He crushed back his emotions, however, and faced Sinon again. "Then I may carry out my plan?"

"Aye—to the half of my wealth," Sinon declared. "Jasor, I do not understand the change which has come upon you. But this thing you may do if you can."

"Then we stop at Himyra," Croft announced.

"At Himyra!" Sinon stared.

"Aye. I would see Jadgor of Aphur so quickly as I may."

"See Jadgor? You?" Sinon protested. "Think you Jadgor receives men of our caste without good cause?"

"He will see Jasor of Nodhur," Croft told him with a smile. "Wait, my father, and you shall witness that, and more."

And now all doubt, all foreboding left him, and he planned. That night as he lay in his bunk aboard the galley, he smiled. To him it seemed that any doubt must have been transferred to the minds of Sinon and Mellia. He heard them speaking above the lap of the waters and the squeak of the oars. He realized how much of an enigma he had become to these two who believed themselves his parents—how wonderful to them must be the change in their son.

But his own mind was coolly collected and calm. He would see Jadgor. He would use his knowledge of that monarch's present wishes to interest him in his plans. He would become not a knight of Nodhur, but a knight of Aphur instead. And then—then—Croft smiled and fell asleep.

The next day he questioned Sinon concerning the nature of the oil used in the lamps, and found it a vegetable product, as he had feared. But—he had been given evidence that the wine supply of the country held no small alcoholic content, which could be recovered in pure form with comparative ease. And—he knew enough of motors to know that slight changes would enable them to burn alcohol in lieu of petroleum-gas. Straightway he asked for something on which to draft his plans.

Sinon, eager now in the development of his son's remarkable plan, furnished parchment and brushes with a square of color, something like India ink, and Croft set to work during the remainder of the trip. He had assembled more than one motor in his day, and after deciding upon his type of construction he immediately went to work. At the end of four days, while the galley was mounting the Na toward the gates of Himyra, he finished the first drafting of parts, and was ready for Jadgor the king. Yet he did not go to Jadgor first, when once he has stepped ashore.

"Wait here," he requested Sinon. "After a time I shall return."

"Hold, my son," Sinon objected at once. "What have you in mind?"

"To see the priest of Zitu without delay," Croft replied without evasion. "Shall Jadgor not give ear, if the priest of Zitu asks?"

"And the priest?" Sinon asked.

"I carry a message to him from Abbu of Scira." Croft held up the tablets that Abbu had inscribed.

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"My son!" Sinon gave him a glance of admiration. "Go, and Zitu go with you. We shall wait for you here."

Croft nodded and left. He had purposely had the galley moored as near the palace as he might. Now he rapidly made his way to the bridge across the Na, and along it to the middle span. And there he paused and gazed about him, at the palace, the pyramid, the vista of the terraced stream. This was Himyra—this was the home of Naia. Today he stood here unheralded and unknown. Yet he stood there because of the dominant spirit which was his, which had dared all to stand there, and—it should not be long until all Himyra—all Tamarizia knew of Jasor of Nodhur, as he surely must be known.

HE went on across the bridge and approached the pyramid. It lifted its vast pile above him. He found an inclined way and began to mount. After a considerable time he reached the top and entered the temple itself. The huge statue of Zitu sat there as he had seen it in his former state. Now almost without volition he bent his knees before it. After all, it stood for the One Eternal Source. He gave it reverence as such.

A voice spoke to him as he knelt. He rose and confronted a priest.

"Who art thou?" the latter asked, advancing toward him. "How come you here at no hour appointed for prayer?"

Croft smiled and held forth the tablets he had brought.

The priest took them, unbound them, and looked at the salutation. His interest quickened. "Ye come from Scira?" he said.

"Aye. Carrying these tablets from the good Abbu, as you see."

The priest considered. "Come," he said again at last, and led the way back of the statue to the head of a descending stair.

Together they went down, along the worn tread of stone steps, turning here and there, until at length they came into a lofty apartment where sat a man in robes of an azure blue.

Before him Croft's guide bowed. "Thy pardon, Magur, Priest of Zitu," he spoke, still in his stilted formal way. "But one comes carrying tablets inscribed with thy name. Even now he knelt in the Holy Place, so that I questioned—asking what he sought."

Magur, high priest in Himyra, at least as Croft judged, took the tablets and scanned each leaf. As he read, his expression altered, grew at first well-nigh startled, and after that nothing short of amazed.

In the end he waved the lay brother from the room and faced Croft alone. "Thou art called how?" he began.

"Jasor of Nodhur—son of Sinon and Mellia of Nodhur," Croft replied.

"Whom, Abbu writes, Zitu hath changed?"

"Aye."

"Thou comest to Himyra, why?"

"To assist the State—to safeguard Tamarizia from the designs of Zollaria perhaps."

"Hold!" Magur cried. "What know ye of Zollaria's plans?"

"Zollaria desires Cathur and plots the downfall of Tamarizia, Priest of Zitu. Think that I bring no knowledge to my task?"

"Yet, were you Jasor indeed, thou mightest know somewhat of Zollaria's plans to some extent," said the priest.

"And Jasor was a dullard, as the schools of Scira will declare," Croft flashed back. "Let my works show whether I stand a fool or not."

"Thy works?" Magur inquired.

"Aye—those I shall do in Tamarizia's name. The first shall be one which shall span the desert twenty times as quickly as the sarpelca caravan—or drive a boat without sails or oars, or propel a carriage without any gnuppa, and so haul ten times the load."

"Thou canst do this?" Magur laid the tablets on the lap of his robe and sat staring at the man who spoke such words.

"Aye."

"And what do you desire of me?"

"An audience with Jadgor," Croft replied: "Since Aphur's king suspects the things Zollaria plans."

Magur frowned. Croft's knowledge seemed to have swept him somewhat off his feet. For moments he sat without motion or sound. But after a time he raised his head. "To me Abbu seemeth right in this," he said. "In this Zitu's hand is. This thing shall be arranged."

He clapped his hands. A brown-robed priest appeared.

"Prepare my chariot for use," the high priest said.

The other bowed and withdrew.

Thereafter Magur sat through another period of silence ere he rose and, signing to Croft, led him through a passage to a small metal platform which, when Magur pulled on a slender cord, began to descend.

Croft smiled. It was a primitive sort of elevator as he saw while they sank

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down a narrow shaft. He fancied it not unlike the ancient lifts employed in Nero's palace in Rome. But he made no comment as they reached the bottom of the shaft and emerged past double lines of bowing priests to the waiting chariot.

Magur mounted and took the reins. Croft stepped into a place at his side. The gnuppas leaped forward at a word. They rumbled down the street and out upon the bridge. Croft had crossed it alone and on foot an hour before. Now he rode back in the car of Zitu's priest.

CHAPTER XI

WITH A MOTOR IN PALOS

AND in that car he passed the palace gates, where the winged dogs stood guard, and entered the palace court.

Guards in burnished cuirasses leaped to the gnuppas' heads when Magur drew rein.

Inclining his head, Magur stepped from his car and led the way within that wing of the palace where Croft already knew that Jadgor led his private life. The high priest moved as of perfect right, saluted by a sentry here and there in corridor and hall. So at length he came to two guardsmen posted outside a door of molded copper, embossed with the symbol of a setting sun, which Croft sensed at once as Aphur's sign.

And here Magur asked for the king.

Quitting his fellow, one of the guardsmen disappeared through the door, was absent for some few moments, and returned. Leaving the door agape behind him, he signed Magur and Croft to enter the room beyond.

Thus for the third time Croft came upon Jadgor of Aphur. And now, as on the first occasion, he found him in the room where he had conversed with Lakkon concerning a way to counter Zollaria's plans. Yet now for the first time he met Aphur's ruler in the flesh, and faced him man to man.

Magur approached the seat where Jadgor waited his coming. "King of Aphur," he said. "I bring with me Jasor of Nodhur, in whom Zitu himself has worked a miracle, as it seems, so that he who was known a dull wit for cycles at Scira's school, having fallen ill unto death, returns to life with a changed mind, and comes bringing tablets to me from a brother in Scira to the end that I gain him audience with thee."

"With me," Jadgor said, bending a glance at Croft.

"Aye."

Jadgor continued to study Croft. "To what end?" he inquired at length.

"To the end that Himyra and all Aphur may grow strong beyond any Tamarizian dream, and Cathur never mount the throne at Zitra," Croft replied.

Jadgor started. He narrowed his eyes. "What talk is this?" he cried, his strong hand gripping the edge of his seat.

"Jadgor the king knows best in his heart," said Croft, and waited. "I ask but his aid to bring this thing to pass."

"These things have been spoken to Magur?" Jadgor turned his eyes to the face of the priest.

"Aye," Croft said quickly.

Jadgor nodded. "Then speak of them to me."

An hour passed while Croft explained and the two Tamarizians listened or bent above the drawings he unrolled. "And this—how do you name it—" Jadgor began at last.

"Motur." Croft threw the word into the native speech.

"This motur will do these things?" Jadgor asked in a tone of amaze.

"All I have promised, and more."

"And what is required to bring this to pass?"

"Workers in metals—a supply of wine to be used as I shall direct—and a closed mouth that Cathur shall not be adviced, nor permitted to view the work until done."

"Those things are granted. I shall see it arranged." Jadgor turned his eyes again in Magur's direction. "Priest of Zitu—Zitu's own hand appears in the plans of Jasor's mind. The designs of Zitu himself have surely entered his soul. I, Jadgor, shall sponsor the carrying out." And once more he addressed Croft. "When shall this work begin?"

"So soon as Aphur wills."

"Good." Jadgor clapped his hands. He was a man of action as Croft knew, quick to see an opportunity and seize it. Now as a guardsman answered the summons, he spoke quickly in direction. "Make search for my son, Prince Robur, and say I desire him here."

The soldier withdrew, and Jadgor plunged into further questions concerning Croft's plans. Croft on his part answered him fully, promising other wonders than the motor in good time, until a faint tinge of color crept into Jadgor's cheeks and his eyes were aglint with a deep and subtle light. Croft would not doubt but that he saw Aphur dominating all the nation, that he dreamed a far-reaching dream.

And at that moment there entered the

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room a youth to whom Croft's heart went out. Clean-limbed, strong-featured, with a well-shaped jaw, and a mouth not lacking in humor, he advanced with a springing stride and stood before the king.

"ROBUR, my son," Jadgor began. "Jasor of Nodhur is our guest. In all things shall you aid him, speaking in all such matters as the mouthpiece of the king. See to it that he has metal-workers under his command to do his bidding, also that wine is given into his hands for such use as he sees fit."

Robur put forth a hand, which Croft took in his own. The Prince of Aphur smiled. "My father's word is the law in Aphur," he said. "Welcome, Nodhur. Ask and I obey."

"First, then," said Croft, "I would visit my father's galley at the quays and acquaint them with what has occurred before they continue up the Na."

"Come, then," Robur responded to the natural request.

He led Croft from the room. Five minutes later the two men were driving down the terraced inclines to the quay where Sinon's galley lay. Not only that, but at his own request, Croft held the reins above the four gnuppas and guided them down the sloping roads. He felt for the first time that at last he stood on the threshold of that success for which he had planned.

And thus he began that work on Palos which was to hold him for many months. He presented Sinon and Mellia to Robur, and after an hour spent in explanations, and ending with a promise to visit Ladhra after he had his work in Himyra started, he left them divided between amazement and pride in their son.

"Once what I intend is completed, we will mount these splendid roads without gnuppas, and at many times their speed," he said as Robur and he reentered the prince's car.

Robur opened his eyes. "Say you so? Is it for that I am to aid you as my father said?"

"Aye."

"Then let us begin at once. I would like to see the thing accomplished," Robur urged.

Croft nodded and briefly described what was required.

"There is a place where the doors of metal and the bodies of the chariots and carriage are molded," Robur said. "Metal is melted and worked into shape, according to designs."

Croft had felt assured that some such industry existed from the molded doors and the type of the other metalwork he had seen. "Take me there, O Robur of Aphur," he said.

Robur laughed. He was an exceedingly companionable man. "Call me not by so lengthy a title," he exclaimed. "I am drawn to you, Jasor. Let us forget questions of caste or rank between ourselves. Speak to me as Rob."

"Gladly will I call you so," said Croft, his heart warming to this proffered friendship of Aphur's heir. "And let us pledge ourselves now to work for the welfare of our nation until it is assured." He thrust out a hand.

Robur's eyes lighted as they held Croft's palm. "This is a day of wonder for all Tamarizia," he said, and turned the gnuppas southward along the river road.

In the end he brought them to a stand before an enormous building, wherein Croft found the flares of fires, and men, well-nigh naked, at work in their glare. Robur led him to the captain in charge of the place, and made him acquainted with Croft's needs. Inside an hour Croft was superintending the makings of certain wooden patterns, to be molded and cast in tempered copper, while Robur looked on, all eyes.

And his eyes were glinting as they left the Palosian foundry and drove toward the royal depots of wines, after Croft had given certain of the metalworkers the designs for a huge copper retort to be made at once.

At the depots, where Croft found unlimited supplies of wine, stored in skin bottles of tabur hide, Jason ordered the building of a brick furnace for the retort when it was done, giving the dimensions and plans of construction to masons hurriedly called. That task arranged for, Robur drove him back to the palace, and led him straight to his own private suite.

A WOMAN rose as they entered. She was sweet-faced, with brown eyes and hair. Robur presented Croft to her as his wife, a princess of Milidhur, and proudly displayed two children, a boy and a girl. Croft found his reception gracious in the extreme, and learned he was to be the guest of Robur and Gaya while engaged in his work. He was to learn also that Gaya was no uncommon name in Tamarizia, and that it fitted the wife of Aphur's prince. She was a cheerful, bright, and sympathetic soul, who listened to Robur's and Croft's description

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of their plans, and cried out with delight at what they proposed.

Thereafter the days passed quickly, and Croft checked off each as it fled as bringing one day nearer the time set for the formal betrothal of Naia to Kyphallos, whom, he learned, was also a guest of the palace, through meeting him now and again, and questioning the prince, whom, when alone, he now called Rob.

And as the days passed, part after part of the new engine which was to revolutionize transportation on Palos was drafted, molded, and made. Robur's wonder grew, as it seemed, with the making of each new part, and his impatience of the final result became intense. But many hands made rapid work. Croft selected each man who showed any particular aptitude and delegated him to that individual task.

The huge retort was set up and was producing pure alcoholic spirit every day. Inside ten days Croft himself began the assembling of the already finished parts. At his own request, Robur was permitted to assist. More than once Croft smiled to himself as he beheld the crown prince of Aphur soiled, grimy, smudged, and enjoying himself immensely, tugging away at a wrench or wielding a riveting-hammer on the growing work of wonder which they built.

To gain speed, Croft had introduced the unheard-of night-shift in Himyra. Day and night now the work went on, and his first creation advanced apace. Only on the winding of the magneto did he maintain great secrecy. Over that he and Robur worked alone. It was the main, essential part, he explained to the prince. Without it the whole thing would be useless and dead. He even tried to make Robur understand the electric natur of the device and, failing, told him it was the same as the lightning in the clouds.

"Zitu!" cried Robur with a glance of something akin to fright. "Jasor, would you harness Zitu's fire?"

"By Zitu's permission," Croft said.

Aphur's prince studied that. "Aye," he said at length. "My friend, you are a strange and wonderful man. Jadgor believes that Zitu himself had endowed your mind, and Magur says as much in your favor, also."

"Magur speaks the truth," Croft declared, once more sensing a possible means of harmonizing the approaching need for his return to earth, were he to keep the bond unbroken between Palos and his earthly body. "Listen, Rob. Strange things occurred in this body of mine in Scira. At times—when the need occurs—it shall fall asleep; and from each sleep shall it return with new knowledge for the good of Tamarizia's race, and the confounding of Zollaria's plans."

"Zollaria! Hai!" Robur exclaimed. It was the first time Croft had mentioned the northern nation to him.

"To oppose which Jadgor designs to betroth your cousin to Kyphallos of Cathur." Suddenly Croft grew bold.

Robur frowned.

"Rob," Croft went on, "I would ask a favor if it may be granted."

"Speak," Robur said.

"I would be present at the betrothal-feast inside the next few days."

"By Zitu, and you shall," Robur declared.

"My caste—" Croft began.

Robur laughed and tapped him on the breast with a wrench. "Rise, *Hupor!* If this work succeeds, that will be arranged."

Croft felt his pulses quicken. "You mean—" he began again, and once more paused.

Robur nodded. "That Jadgor, my father, will raise you to the first rank beneath the throne."

CHAPTER XII

THE NEW PRINCE, HUPOR JASOR

ON THE day before the betrothal-feast Croft finished his magneto, tested it out before Robur's eyes, and obtained a good, fat spark. Hastily connecting it with the now assembled motor, for which workmen were building a chassis such as Palos had never seen, he filled a testing-tank with spirit, primed the carburetor, that he had somewhat changed for the use of the different fuel, and then laid hold of the crank.

It was a tense moment, and his voice showed his realization of the fact as he spoke to Robur: "Watch now, Rob—watch!"

He spun the crank around. For the first time on Palos there came a motor's cough. Again Croft whirred the crank, spinning it to generate the life-giving spark. He was answered by a hearty hum. The motor quivered and shook. A staccato sound of steady explosions filled the room in which it stood. Like gunfire its exhaust broke forth. The heavy balance-wheel Croft had arranged for

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the trial to load it to safety spun swiftly round and round.

A commotion rose in the shop. Captains and subcaptains ran from their work to view the success of that for which they had worked. They stood staring at the throbbing, quivering engine. Croft straightened and stood, pale of face but with blazing eyes, before them. He had won! Won! Robur's face told him he had won! It was a face filled with a mighty wonder and delight.

And suddenly the crown prince spoke: "Back—back to your work. Work as ye have never worked before. Complete the frame for this to ride upon, the wheels. Make all ready, men of Aphur, and spare no effort to the aim. A new day has dawned in Aphur—in Tamarizia. Inside the hour there shall be a new prince. Salute him, *Hupor Jasor,* who thus has served the state."

They lifted their hands in salute, those captains, and turned away. Croft looked into Robur's eyes. "Rob," he stammered, and put out his hands—"Rob—"

"Aye," Robur said. "Such is the order of Aphur's king did the test we were to make today succeed. He will himself confirm it tomorrow night. In the meantime I am told to bid Jasor to the betrothal feast of Naia of Aphur to Cathur's prince. What now of caste my friend?"

Croft quivered. He shook in every limb. The gulf was bridged—that gulf of rank between himself and the girl of gold at the shrine of whose sweet presence his own spirit bowed. He opened his lips yet found himself overwhelmed with emotion, unable to speak.

Robur cast an arm about his shoulders as the two men stood. "Jasor, my friend," he once more began. "Means this thing so much to you? Why? What things have you in mind I know not of?

"Speak. Know you not, Jason, that I love you?"

"Aye," said Croft. "Yet Rob, I may not speak of those things as yet." Nor did he feel that he could at present confess the thing in his heart. "Later you shall know all," he declared. "As for the rest—you are my dearest friend."

"Speak when you will," Robur replied. "Tomorrow at the house of Prince Lakkon, Jadgor shall name you Hupor before the nobles of Aphur. So is it planned. And when this motur of ours is completed, you shall drive it to Ladhra and take with you the noble rank for Sinon, since he has served his state in bringing about your birth."

Tomorrow night at the house of Prince Lakkon! The words rang in Croft's brain. Naia—his beloved should see him exalted, made a noble of Aphur. What more auspicious meeting could he desire than this? It was fate—fate. Suddenly Croft felt his face flush and his eyes took on a flashing light. "Rob," he cried. "This is only the beginning. What we shall do for Tamarizia Zitu only knows."

"Would Zitu had sent you before this then," Robur growled.

Croft noted his change of manner with amaze, and plainly Robur was not unmindful of his regard.

"I question not the wisdom of Jadgor, my father," he went on quickly. "Yet like I not this sacrfice of a virgin maid to the lecherous son of Cathur's king."

"Rob!" Croft cried, as his friend and comrade paused and caught a single lung-filling breath and went on. "Zitu himself must frown upon such a thing."

Robur eyed him with mounting interest, and suddenly Croft raced ahead in eager question. "Rob—how long between the night of betrothal and the marriage itself?"

"Hai!" Robur narrowed his eyes. "A cycle, my friend. By royal custom these things are never matters of haste."

"A cycle!" Croft threw up his head and laughed. "Rob, could we make Tamarizia strong beyond any dream of her wisest men inside that cycle, what then?"

Robur frowned. "A promise is a promise, my friend."

"But," said Croft, "Much may happen in a cycle—and Zollaria plans."

"What mean you?" Robur seized his arm in a grip like iron. "Jasor—you are a strange man. Twice now have you spoken of Zollaria's plans. What do you have in mind?"

"To watch Cathur's prince," said Croft. "Hold, Rob—the priest, Abbu, is my friend. He will help us in this. Magur, too, must give us aid. Let us watch—and work."

WORK—yes, work. With a Sirian year in which to work for such a prize what could a man not do? Croft threw up his face and met Robur's questioning gaze. "Aphur shall show the way to the nation," he cried. "Zollaria's plans shall come to naught, my friend."

"Zitu!" Robur gasped. "After tomorrow night we must speak of these things to Aphur's king. Jasor, I am minded that

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Magur is right. Zitu works through you to his ends."

The motor coughed and died, having used up its fuel. Croft smiled, and called Robur back to work. Through the day they toiled, and by night the engine was bolted to the chassis, wheeled into the assembling-room by the workmen that afternoon. There remained now no more than the assembling of the clutch and the transmission before the body should be affixed to complete the car. And the body was ready and waiting to be bolted fast.

Croft worked throughout the night. Robur offered to assist, but he refused. He wanted to be alone—to think—think—plan the future steps of those things he would do inside the coming year. He had sworn to make Aphur strong. And as he assembled the final portions of this first work of his genius, he considered that.

The answer was plain. Aphur must arm—and Nodhur—and Milidhur from whence came the gentle, sweetly sympathetic, Gaya, Robur's wife. And of arms he knew little, but—he could learn. Only he had to return to earth. There, not many miles from his own town, was the home of a man who before now had won fame as a maker of arms. Indeed, as Croft knew he had designed weapons afterward adopted by the royal nations of Europe and made by them on a patent lease from this man, Croft's friend.

It would be easy, then, to learn what he desired; to bring back the plans of those selfsame weapons and make them here under the patronage of Aphur's king. Then—well—let Zollaria plan and hold what bait she would before Cathur's eyes. Croft chuckled to himself as he worked, and the captain assisting him in Robur's place thought him pleased with their progress and smiled.

"This motur of thine will surely draw the car in lieu of gnuppas, my lord?" he inquired.

"Aye," said Croft with a nod.

"By Zitu! Never was anything like it dreamed of in Tamarizia before thy coming," the captain rumbled in his throat.

Croft nodded again. "Tomorrow I shall bring you orders to start all men working on those parts they have made for this, in untold numbers," he returned. "And hark you, captain. Each man shall make but the one part—which he makes the best. So shall we make many and build them together at once and produce a vast number of cars, and other motors to drive boats on the Na."

"By Zitu! Then shall Aphur rule the seas indeed."

"Tamarizia shall rule," said Croft with an assurance not to be denied.

The captain gave him a glance. What he read carried conviction to his mind. "My lord," he said. "My lord."

"Lord." They called him that now. Croft chuckled again to himself and went to work. Lord. And tomorrow night—no, the night of this day as it would be on earth—they would call him "lord" before Naia herself. He would meet her—speak to her, perhaps. He called upon the captain for assistance and redoubled his rate of work.

And as the first rays of Sirius began to gild the red walls of Himyra, he finished filling the fuel tank with spirits, told the captain to open wide the doors of the building wherein they had toiled through the night, and seized hold upon the crank of the engine he had built.

The motor roared out. Croft sprang to the driver's seat. He let in his clutch. And slowly—very slowly the car moved toward the open doors.

One glimpse Jason had of the captain's face—a thing wide-eyed, agape with amazed belief, and then he was outside the massive walls of that foundry womb in which the car had been formed. He was out in the streets of Himyra, riding the thing he had made—the first of many things as he had determined during the night.

For a moment visions of marine motors, tractors, airplanes, filled his brain; then as a night guard at the throat of the street caught sight of him, and wavering between fear and duty, yielded swiftly to the former and fled with a yell of terror, he came back to the matter in hand.

He gained the river road and opened the throttle notch by notch. Swiftly and more swiftly the new car moved. The sweet air of morning sang about his ears. The throb of the motor was a paean of praise—a promise of what was to come. He reached the palace entrance and turned in. Straight to the steps of the king's wing he drove and brought the car to a stand.

Like their fellow of the street, the guards shrank back in amazement from this strangest of chariots they had ever seen, until Croft, rising in his seat, ordered them to send word to Robur and Jadgor himself, that he waited their inspection of the car. He himself was thrilling with creative fire, divine. It was in his mind to demonstrate the new creation in the vast court, deserted thus

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early in the day. He throttled down and sat waiting while a guardsman hurried away.

Then into the midst of his elation broke the voice of Aphur's prince. "Hai, Jasor, my lord, this is a surprise. Now I see that which last night you planned."

Robur had hurried forth with Gaya by his side, and behind him now came Jadgor, between a double row of guards. While Croft rose and gave a hand to Robur and Gaya in turn, and bowed before the king, the latter advanced quite to the side of the new, and to his experience, wonderful machine.

"YOU came here in the motur itself?" Robur asked.

"Yes," Croft replied. "And well nigh frightened a night guard out of his wits when he saw me bearing down on him, as well as carrying consternation into the minds of even soldiers here."

"Robur laughed. "I can well believe that," he agreed. "Had I known not of it I fear I should have been sadly disturbed myself."

Jadgor smiled. "If it carried fear into the hearts of Aphur's guards, might it not do likewise to an enemy's men as well?" he remarked.

"O king, it is in my mind that it would do even that," Croft returned, sensing the deeper meaning back of the mere words as applying to a specific enemy. He gave Jadgor a meaning glance. "May I show you the motur in action, O King of Aphur?" he asked.

"Yes," Jadgor agreed.

"Wait!" Robur cried, as Croft resumed his seat. "Wait, Jasor, I shall go with you. Gaya will be the first woman of Aphur to ride in such a chariot."

Gaya smiled. Like most of the Tamarizian women, Croft had seen she seemed devoid of any particular fear. She took Robur's hand and stepped into the car. Robur followed with scant dignity in his eagerness to put this new mode of travel to the test.

Then Croft engaged his clutch and the car moved off, rolling without apparent means of propulsion in circles about the great red court while the guards and Jadgor watched. For some five minutes Croft kept up the circling before he brought the machine to a stand before the king, and once more rising, bowed.

"Your words were true, O Jasor," spoke Jadgor then. "In this I see great service to the state. Hail Hupor!" He caught a sword from the nearest soldier, and advancing, struck Croft lightly upon the breast with the flat of the blade. "More of this to-night," he said, stepping back. "In the meantime arrange to build as many of these moturs as you may—also for those which shall propel the boats."

Turning, he withdrew with his guard, disappearing into the palace. Gaya smiled at her husband and Croft. "I, too, shall withdraw now," she began. "I can see you are eager to be alone with this new toy. My thanks, Lord Jasor, for the ride. All my life long I shall remember myself the first of Tamarizian women to mount your wonderful car."

Robur helped her to get out, then sprang back to Croft's side. His face was alight. "Now—go! Let us ride!" he exclaimed. "Let us leave the city along the highway to the south and test the motur for speed."

Nothing loth, Croft once more advanced gas and spark and let in the clutch. Outside the palace entrance he turned south along the Na. Robur, beside him, seemed strangely like a boy. "Approach the gate slowly," he chuckled as they rode. "Let me see for myself what effect we have on the guards."

His wish was granted in a surprisingly short time. As they neared the gate, not yet open to morning traffic, a guardsman appeared. Plainly he was watching, yet he made no move. He seemed practically paralyzed at the sight which met his eyes. In the end, however, he suddenly lifted his spear as though expecting to meet a charge with its point. His face was rigidly set. He appeared one determined to die in the path of duty if die he must.

"Open, fellow!" Robur shouted with a grin.

His voice wrought a change in the man. He caught a deep breath, dropped his spear and flung himself toward the levers which worked the gate. "My lord," he said, as Croft drove past where he now stood at attention with the gate swung wide. "My lord!"

Robur flung him a bit of silver and a laugh. Then they were out of the tunnel through the wall and rushing up the well-built road. "That fellow thought us Zutemque himself, to judge by his expression," he chuckled. "Jasor, my friend—go faster—let—"

"Let her out!" Croft could not resist the expression of earth.

"Aye," said Robur, staring. "Let—her—out. Where got you that form of speech, my friend?"

"I—it was used on the moment to express the idea intended," Croft replied. "It is as though one released the reins and allowed the gnuppas to run free."

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Robur nodded. "Yes, I sense it. Let—her—out."

Croft complied. They sped south. Without a speedometer Croft could only estimate their rate of progress, but he judged the new engine made thirty miles an hour at least.

Robur was amazed. So were others after a time. The speeding car met the first of the early market throng and cleared the road of everything it met. Men, women, and live stock bolted as the undreamed engine of locomotion roared past. Their cries blended into an uproar which tore laughter from Robur's throat. Croft himself gave way to more than one smile.

Swiftly they passed the area of cultivation and entered the desert road where Croft had seen the sarpelca caravan on his first Palosian day. On, on they roared along the level surface between dunes of yelllow sand and across golden arid flats. The exhilaration of motion was in their veins. Head down above his wheel Croft sent the car ahead, until dashing between two dunes they came to where a second road joined that on which they ran.

Robur cried out. Croft flung up his head. One swift glimpse he had of a team of purple-plumed gnuppas reared on their haunches, their forefeet pawing the air, their nostrils flaring, their eyes maddened with fright, and of a burnished carriage behind them. Then he was past, throttling the engine, seeking to bring the car to a stand. While from behind the sound of a strong man shouting, came hoarsely to his ears.

CHAPTER XIII

HOW NAIA FIRST SAW JASOR

THE car slowed down and stood still. Robur sprang to his feet. Croft turned to look back. The carriage was off the road and dashing across a level stretch of sand.

How it came that Prince Lakkon's carriage was here, neither man knew. They were to only learn later that Naia, wearied of her preparations for the coming feast of bethrothal, had induced her father to take her to her mountain home on the previous night, and that now she was returning in time to avoid the later heat of the Sirian day. Yet both men had recognized the purple-plumed gnuppas and the conveyance which now swayed and rocked behind their fright-maddened flight.

"Lakkon's!" Croft gasped.

"Aye, by Zitu," Robur gave assent. "And should Chythron fail to hold them soon, death lies in that direction at the bottom of the gorge."

"Sit down. Hold fast!" Even as Robur spoke, Croft sensed his full meaning and planned. Under his touch the engine roared. He let in his clutch with a jerk which shot the car into motion with a leap. Death lay ahead of the careening carriage behind the beasts he had frightened out of their driver's control. Whether Chythron alone, or Lakkon or the prince and his daughter rode in that rocking conveyance it was his place to do what he could. Leaving the road with a lurch which nearly unseated Robur and himself, he swung the car about and increased its speed.

He had told Jadgor he would build an engine to outrun the Tamarizian gnuppa, and here at once was the test. True Croft thought not of that in any such fashion as he drove. His only fear was lest he fail to overhaul the flying beasts in time. His greatest fear was that Naia herself might be in that frantic rush toward death, hurtling to an end invoked at his hands. His soul sank in a sick wave of horror. Yet he set his lips and clenched his jaws and drove. Faster and faster leaped the roaring car behind the leaping things of flesh and blood he sought to overtake.

And he was overtaking them now. He crossed the second road with a nerve-wracking swing and jolt. Unable to procure rubber for his wheels he had faced them with heavy leather some two inches thick, which lacked the resiliency of air. His arms ached from the wrench with which he crossed the road. But that past he gathered speed with every revolution of the wheels.

"Faster! Zitu! Faster!" Robur urged at his side. "Faster, Jasor—the gorge is just ahead!"

Croft made no reply. He was almost abreast of the carriage now. But he himself had seen the break in the surface of the flat across which he drove. He set his teeth till the muscles in his strong jaws bunched and drove toward it at top speed. His one hope was that the thing which had set the gnuppas into flight might be able to turn them back.

And he was past them now! Past them, with the gorge directly ahead. He began to edge in upon them. He would stop them or turn them at any cost to himself. And the margin was scant. Nearer and nearer to the lip of the sheer descent he was forced to turn in order to hold his lead.

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"Jump! Save yourself!" His voice rose in a cry of warning to his companion in the car. The gorge was very close. He turned to parallel its course and found it angling off at a slant. And the gnuppas were turning, too—edging away from the thing they feared—edging, edging away. Croft edged with them, turning them more and more. Chythron was sawing on his reins. Suddenly the beasts stopped in a series of ragged lunges and stood quivering and panting. Croft stopped the car.

"By Zitu! Jasor, you are a man!"

He became conscious that Robur was still with him on the seat, and that he himself was aquiver in every limb.

Yet he forgot that as the purple curtains of the carraige were swept back and Prince Lakkon leaped out, gave Robur and him a swift glance, and assisted Naia to alight.

ROBUR and he leaped down. They advanced toward Lakkon and his daughter. "My uncle and my cousin," Robur began; "we crave your pardon for causing you this inconvenience through no intent of our own. Yet must you give thanks to our brave Lord Jasor here for undoing our work so quickly as he might, and turning back the gnuppas from their course. By Zitu, I am assured, had he not succeeded he would have gone with you into the gorge."

Lakkon bowed. "My Lord Jasor," said he, "it appears that I owe you my safety as well as that of my child. Accept my service at your need. I have heard of you and yonder wonder-carriage you have wrought. After tonight I go to my villa in the mountains. You must be our guest for a time. Naia, my child, extend your thanks to the noble Jasor for your life."

Croft found himself looking into the purple eyes of the woman he loved. He thrilled as she lifted her glance. Then, as her red lips parted, he opened his own. "Nay, not your life, Princess Naia—some bruises had you leaped from the carriage, perhaps."

"My thanks for the service none the less, my lord," she made answer in her own well-remembered voice. "I like not bruises truly, and at least you did save me those."

She extended a slender hand.

Croft took her fingers in his and found his pulses leaping at the contact. What more favorable meeting could have brought him before this girl in the flesh? Prompted by a sudden impulse, he bent and set his lips to the fingers he held, straightened and looked deep into the wells of her eyes.

A swift color mounted into the maiden's cheeks at the unwonted form of homage and the fire in Croft's glance. She dropped her lids and seemed confused for the first time during the course of the whole affair.

Robur broke into the rather tense pause. "What say you, Lakkon; your gnuppas are hardly fit to be trusted more today. Enter this car our Hupor has built, and be the first Prince of Aphur to enter Himyra thus."

Lakkon smiled. He spoke to Chythron, ordering him to drive the gnuppas to the city as best he might. Then, with Croft acting as Naia's guide, turned with Robur toward the car.

Nor was he niggard in his praise as Croft started the engine, and placing the girl beside him, drove back to the road and along it to the city gates. He even laughed with enjoyment at the further consternation their progress caused along the road, and when a team of draft gnuppas bolting, scattered a mass of broken crates full of the strange water-fowl Croft had found the first day, in a squawking confusion, he scattered largess to the owner of team and load and bade Croft proceed.

As for Croft, that ride with the girl of his ultimate desire at his side was a delight such as he had never known. Coupled with the sense that he had saved her from possible injury at least, if not from actual death, and at the same time proved his own daring, was blended the sheer enjoyment of her presence and the sound of her voice as she questioned him concerning the, to her marvelous, conveyance he drove. Those questions he answered freely, knowing her loyal to Tamarizia at heart.

So in the end they passed the city gates and made their way to Lakkon's house, where Croft turned in toward the massive moulded doors.

Naia showed some surprise. "My lord," she said, "you know our dwelling, it would seem."

"I have looked upon it with longing ere this," said Croft, growing bold through the kindness of fate. For fate he felt it was which had brought them together in a fashion such as this.

And Naia gave him a glance and once more veiled her eyes while a tide of responsive color dyed her face. Plainly she caught the meaning of his words.

"Your name is among those of our guests for tonight," she said. "Your welcome will be doubly great after today,

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and—you will accept our invitation to the mountains?"

"If you add your invitation to your father's, so soon as I may arrange the work on other moturs," Croft agreed.

"Then you will come," she told him softly without lifting her eyes. And Croft thrilled at her manner as much as at her words. He stopped the car, reached up and rang the gong as Chythron had done the first day he came to Aphur, leaped out and assisted Naia to alight.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SLIP 'TWIXT CUP AND LIP

AND that night all Himyra was *en fête*. Under the light of fire urns, oil lamps, and flaring torches, whose glare lit up the sky above the walls, the Red City of Aphur made holiday. Crowds swarmed the public squares and clustered about the free entertainments, the free refreshment booths erected by order of Jadgor, Aphur's king, to celebrate the coming alliance between Cathur and the state.

Processions of the people moved through the streets, laughing, singing, shouting and making merry in honor of the event. Once before when Robur brought a princess of Milidhur to Himyra the city had flared thus red in the night. Now again Jadgor was making greater his prestige of power and increasing Aphur's political might.

Croft, returning to his quarters in the palace from a day spent in starting intensive work on a hundred engines and a marine adoption of the same, met a surprise.

Upon his copper couch was a noble dress consisting of a golden cuirass embossed in silver, a kilted skirt, gold and silver leg casings, and sandals, a leathern belt, and a tempered copper sword. As he came in a Mazzerian servant rose and bade him to one of the palace baths. Returning from that, Croft donned a sleeveless shirt of silklike tissue and the cuirass over that. Kneeling, the servant adjusted the sandals and rose to buckle on the sword. These things he mentioned were a gift from Jadgor himself, a mark of Croft's service to the state.

Jason had been less than human had he not felt a glow of satisfaction in this sign of royal esteem and friendship. But greater far than that was the knowledge that this night in Lakkon's house he would meet Naia herself as a friend already known, and be lifted to high rank before her eyes. That tonight would see her pledged to Kyphallos, he chose to overlook. A year must follow before she became the Cathurian's wife. Much could happen in a year, as he had said to Robur days ago.

Something he had read came into his mind. "Let him who wins her take and keep Faustine." He thought that was the form of the quotation. At least it was the sense. He nodded to himself. Let him who could win her take and keep Naia of Aphur. He, Croft, had a year in which to win the woman he desired.

Robur came into the room. Gaya had gone to Lakkon's earlier in the day to act as Naia's lady in the ceremonial preparations. He suggested that Croft and he be off. Aphurian etiquette decreed that the principal guest be the last to arrive, in order that the assembled company might do him honor when he came. Jadgor and Kyphallos would follow, said the prince.

Croft assented at once. Lifting a circlet supporting a tuft of orange feathers, he set it upon his head, and Robur and he set out, in the prince's own car, drawn by four beautiful gnuppas, their bridles trimmed with nodding scarlet plumes.

Before Lakkon's house they found themselves in a press of other carriages and chariots from which were descending the best of Aphur's life.

The huge doors of the court stood open, and the court itself blazed with light. A double line of guards stood within the portals as the guests streamed in, and a herald in gold and purple cried the name of each new arrival aloud through a wide-mouthed trumpet held before his lips.

Inside, the tables were spread much as on the former occasion Croft had witnessed, save that now a dais had been constructed at one end, where were the places of Kyphallos and Naia, Jadgor and Lakkon, and as Jason was to learn of Robur, Gaya and himself. Lakkon stood at the end of the double row of guards and welcomed his guests. He gave Croft his hand with a smile which lighted his eyes. "Welcome, Lord Jasor—to mine house—to Himyra's happiness, to the honor of Aphur," he said, and bent his knee to Robur as the two men passed.

It was then Robur led Croft to the dais and mounted the steps as one who knew beforehand his place assigned. Croft hung back, and his companion laughed. "Up," he cried. "Tonight you are honored of Aphur above most men."

TINGLING at the knowledge, Croft mounted and seated himself at a

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wave from Robur's hand. The prince gazed on the brilliant scene with a smile of something like pride. "A goodly company," he said.

Croft, too, gazed around before he replied. Surely Robur had spoken aright he thought as he swept the body of the guests where colors blended in endless harmony of shades, and the white arms and shoulders of matron and maid gleamed in the play of the lights.

Lights! He cast his eyes about the myriad of flaming lamps and suddenly he smiled. "Yet would it be even more brilliant were the oil lamps removed and in their place we were to put small globes of glass which would emit a radiance not due to oil, but to a glowing filament shut within them, so that they would need no filling, but would burn when a small knob were turned."

"Zitu!" Robur gave him a glance. "Are you at it again—with your wonderful dreams?"

"Yes." Once more Croft smiled and grew serious as it recurred to his mind that before long he must again return to earth. "Call them dreams, Rob," he said. "Dreams they may be—yet shall you see them come true. And—listen, my loyal friend; it may be that before long I shall dream again as I dreamed before—that my body shall lie as Jasor's body lay in Scira—shall seem to die."

"What mean you?" Robur cried. "This you have said before."

Croft shook his head. "I may not tell you more; yet I would exact your promise that when the time comes, as I know it will, you shall set a guard about my body and forbid that it be disturbed until I shall again awake with a full knowledge of what more shall be done for Aphur's good."

"You mean this—you do not jest?" Robur's voice had grown little better than a whisper, and his eyes burned the question into Croft's brain.

"Yes. Will you promise, Rob?"

"I will promise, and what I promise I fulfill," said Robur. "Yet—you arouse fancies within me, Jasor. One would think Zitu himself spoke to you in that sleep."

"No—yet what I do, I do by His grace," Croft replied. "And from each sleep I am assured shall come good to the Tamarizian race." And suddenly as trumpets announced the arrival of Kyphallos and the King, he felt light, relieved, free. He had arranged for those periods of unconsciousness for Jasor's body, and need not trouble more about it with the promise he had won from Jadgor's son.

He watched while Kyphallos came in with Jadgor now and approached the dais. Then, attracted by other trumpets, he turned toward the stair. As before, Naia stood there with Gaya by her side. Yet now she was not the same. Then she had been radiant in gold and purple. Now she stood simply clad in white. White was her robe, edged in silver; white were her sandals and white the plumes which rose above her hair.

Kyphallos and Jadgor waited while the guests took their seats. Lakkon advanced to meet the two women on the stairs, gave his hand to his daughter and turned to descend.

Another figure appeared. It was Magur, the priest, robed in blue, accompanied by two young boys, each bearing a silver goblet on a tray of the same metal. He advanced and met Naia and Lakkon as they reached the foot of the stairs.

"Who comes?" his voice rang out.

"A maid who would pledge herself and her life to a youth, O Prince of Zitu," Lakkon replied.

"The youth is present?" Magur went on with the ritualistic form.

"Aye. He stands yonder with Aphur's king," Lakkon declared.

"Who sponsors this woman at this time?" Magur spoke again.

"I—King of Aphur—brother of her who gave her life," Jadgor's voice boomed forth.

"Come then," Magur said.

The party advanced again across the crystal floor. They joined Kyphallos and the king. They ascended the dais and stood before the assembled guests, who rose.

Magur spoke anew. "Naia of Aphur—thou woman—being woman sister of Ga, and hence a priestess of that shrine of life which is eternal, and guardian of the fire of life which is eternal, is it your intent to pledge thyself to this man of Cathur who stands now at thy side?"

While Croft watched, Naia's lips moved. "Aye," came her response into the ensuing silence. "Myself I pledge to him."

"And thou, Kyphallos of Cathur, do you accept this pledge and with it the woman herself, to make her in the fulness of time thy bride to cherish her and cause her to live as a glory to the name of woman to whom all men may justly give respect?"

"Aye. So I pledge, by Zitu, and Azil, Giver of Life," said Cathur's prince.

"Then take ye this, maid of Aphur." Magur drew from his robe a looped silver cross and pressed it into her hands.

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"Hold it and guard it; look upon is at the symbol of that life eternal which through you shall be kept eternal, and which taken from the hands of Azil the Angel shall be transmuted within thee into the life of men."

Turning, he took two goblets and poured wine from one to the other and back. One he extended to Naia and one to Cathur's prince. "Drink," he said. "Let these symbolize thy two bodies, the life of which shall be united from this time on in purpose. Drink, and may Zitu bless ye in that union which comes by his intent."

Cathur raised his goblet. "I drink of thee deeply," he spoke, addressing Naia.

"And of thee I drink," she made answer, and set the wine to her lips.

As she did so her eyes leaped over the silver rim and met the eys of Croft. For a single instant his glance burned into hers, and she faltered, her hand lowered the goblet quickly and she swayed. Yet even so, she caught herself, on the instant as a storm of applause broke from the guests and sank to the divan, supported by Kyphallos's hand.

AS FOR Croft, for him the light of the oil lamps flickered and paled. He sat momentarily lost in a mental tumult roused by that glance in Naia's eyes. In that moment he felt he had spoken to her soul—had reached to her inmost spirit, and made himself known. He had not meant to do it. He had not realized while he leaned forward watching the betrothal rite, that all his loathing of it, all his protest of spirit against it, had kindled in his eyes. Not, indeed, until he had plumbed the purple depths of *her* eyes over the rim of the goblet had he known—or dreamed that she could see and know—as now he felt she had known.

Now, however, he stole a second glance to where she sat and found her deathly pale with set lips and a bosom heaving so strongly beneath the pure white fabric of her robe, that it seemed to actually flutter above her rounded breasts. Her hand stole out and lifted a goblet from the table and she drank. It seemed to Croft that she sought so to steady herself before she set the wine back, and forced herself to smile.

Thereafter came the feast, the music, the dancers, a troupe of singers and another of acrobats—the usual gamut of a Tamarizian state entertainment, dragging out its length, before Jadgor rose at last in his place and a hush fell over the court.

Croft, who throughout it all had been strangely silent, roused to the pressure of Robur's hand, and as the prince prompted, he rose.

Thereafter he left his place and knelt before Jadgor while the king drew his sword and struck him upon the breast and dubbed him so a Prince of Aphur, and rising, bowed to the king, and to the guests who rose to salute him in his new-found rank.

But of them all to Croft it seemed that he saw only the fair young girl beside the Cathurian prince. And now, as before, his eyes leaped swiftly to her face. Only now, instead of an expression of something like a startled knowledge, there leaped toward him a purple light of pleasure, of approval, of congratulation, and she smiled, as one may smile in recognition of an old and well-known friend.

Then he found himself clasping hands with Robur, with Lakkon, with Kyphallos, since the thing could not be avoided. Gaya, too, gave him her hand and a word of congratulation, and—Naia was holding forth her rounded, bare arm and the slender fingers which that morning he had kissed.

He took them now and held them in his own. He trembled, and knew it, and even so dared again to meet her eyes.

Once more he found them startled, puzzled, almost confused. A faint color crept into her cheeks. "My lord," she said, "Aphur has given her highest appreciation of your worth. That should mean much to you."

"Aye," Croft found his tongue. "Since it accords me the privilege of a further word with you."

She drew her hand away. "Is a word with me of so great a value?" she questioned with a somewhat unsteady laugh.

"To speak with Naia of Aphur I would dare death itself." Croft did not tell her how much he had already dared for that word indeed.

"You are a bold man," she said, as he paused, and went on quickly. "Yet, since you value it so highly, forget not our invitation of this morning or that house in the mountains which is ours."

"I shall not forget, Princess Naia," Croft replied. His brain was in a whirl. She had repeated the invitation. Did she really wish him to come? Had he read her glorious eyes aright? Had she sensed the truth as he had sensed it the first time he had seen her? Did she feel it? Did she know? Had the call of his spirit reached the spirit which was hers? Croft hardly believed that it had.

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He scarcely believed that her knowledge of that call was a definite thing as yet. Still—he was sure she felt something she herself could not wholly fathom—that her invitation was sincere, dictated by the call she as yet did not understand. Therefore he promised himself as well as her, to accept. And he vowed that before that visit to her mountain home was ended, she should recognize the truth.

CHAPTER XV

THE MAN'S DEMAND

TOWARD that end and what it should finally bring about, Croft now made his plans. Kyphallos he learned would leave on the morrow for Scira, and as he knew would very shortly thereafter make that promised journey to Niera, where he would once more come under the attraction of the Zollarian Magnet—that tawny Kalamita who had attended the feast on Anthra before he started south.

On the following day therefore, he asked audience of Jadgor, took Robur with him when he apeared before the king and suggested the use of a spy on Cathur's heir; telling so much as he felt he dared, to support his plea.

At first Jadgor was amazed. "How know you these things, Lord Jasor!" he cried.

"I have heard things in the north," Croft replied without naming the location, letting Jadgor suppose it was during his days in Scira if he would.

And it seemed that Jadgor did that very thing, since after a time he asked exactly what Jasor would propose.

Croft suggested a consultation with Magur—and the sending of word to Abbu in the name of both Jasor and the Chief Priest of Himyra to see what Kyphallos did. That there was reason for his suggestion the very next day brought proof. A sailor from a Cathurian galley was found concealed in the shop where the new engines were being made. This following hard on the heels of Kyphallos's departure, Croft held suspicious indeed.

He smiled in rather a grim way when Robur told him of the occurrence, rushing into the room where he sat engaged in the drawing of some further plans. But he took no steps save to have the sailor taken back to his ship and his captain cautioned to keep him out of harm's way, and to recommend that Robur place a guard about the shop. Indeed he was not greatly worried as he knew of one way in which he could watch Kyphallos and learn what he planned.

On the sixth day, having seen the work on the engines well under way, he took the car, filled its tanks with spirits and drove out the north road toward that white palace in the mountains where he had been bidden as a guest.

He had sent no word of his coming, yet he felt assured that a welcome would be his. There was a smile on his lips and a paean of joy in his heart as he stormed up the mountain grades and out across those gorges the road crossed on massive arches of stone.

So at last he stopped before the steps leading up to the doors of the white Aphurian mansion, and sprang down. He mounted the steps and found once more the blue servant he had seen on another occasion, watching in awed expectancy just inside. To him he gave his title and asked for Naia herself.

The blue man bowed. "She lies yonder, Lord," he replied. "I shall lead you to her."

Following the servant, Croft came about a cluster of flowering bushes to find the hostess he sought.

She lay upon a wine-red wood divan, while beside her sat the blue girl Maia, her supple body swinging in easy rhythm as she waved a fan for the comfort of the woman she served.

By now, Croft was fully accustomed to the disregard of clothing displayed by the Tamarizian servants and even the nobles themselves in their more private life.

Hence he was not disturbed by the fact that Maia's well-turned torso swayed before him unclothed, or surprised that since she knew not of his coming, no more than a tissue so sheer that the flesh beneath it lent it color, draped Naia's perfect form as she rose, to stand before him and stretch forth her hands.

"My Lord, Jasor," she exclaimed. "Your coming is as unexpected as welcome. Would you feel flattered were I to confess that I was thinking of you before you appeared?"

"Nay, not flattered, but filled with a delight beyond words and a fear lest I deserve less than that!" Croft smiled, as he took her warm flesh in his hands and gazing down into her eyes, found in their wide opened purple depths no surprise or startled question, but only pleasure as it seemed to him then.

Hupor, the great houndlike beast who had been lying beside the two women, rose, and lifting himself upon his mas-

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sive haunches laid his forepaws on Croft's shoulder and stared into his face.

"Ah, Hupor gives you his favor, granted a few. Remove your cuirass and rest," Naia said resuming her seat and signing the Mazzerian to assist her guest. Then as he slipped out of the metal harness and stood in the soft shirt beneath it, she invited him to a place at her side and directed both servants to withdraw.

"You are come for the promised visit?" she began when they sat alone.

"If the time fits in with your convenience," Croft replied.

NAIA looked down at her sandalless feet, high arched and pink of nail. "I will be frank," she went on. "I have been piqued because you delayed your coming." She glanced up with a little laugh.

"And I that I could not come the sooner," Croft blended his laughter with hers.

"You came in your car?"

"Yes."

"Tell me," she said, and laid a hand on his arm. "My father declares that Jadgor thinks you inspired of Zitu to make Tamarizia great. Tell me, about these moturs and your work."

Next to his love, these things were first in Croft's mind. For an hour he talked to the girl at his side. And he talked well. Her presence fired him, loosened his tongue. He painted for her a picture of Aphurian transportation transformed, of motors filling the highways, of motor-driven ships on river and sea, and swept on by his own conceptions spoke of motors as possible things of the air.

"Zitu!" she cried. "My lord would dare what none save the birds dare now?"

"Even so," said Croft. "So shall Aphur become strong—stronger than any other State of Tamarizia—strong enough to guard the western gate without another's aid."

He had made the remark of deliberate purpose, and now he heard the girl beside him catch her breath, and glancing toward her, found her eyes wide and very, very dark, with a strange light in their depths. "You—my Lord Jasor, you can do this thing?"

"And will," he declared.

He saw Naia of Aphur quiver. "One who did that might ask what he would, and receive it of the State," she said slowly; and then once more her fingers touched his arm and he found them icy cold. "My lord, does Zitu answer prayers?"

Croft's mind leaped swiftly from her words to a night when he had seen her kneeling before the figure of Azil in this self-same house—when he had heard her plea, lifted out of an anguished spirit—to the One Eternal Source. "What mean you?" he asked.

"If one—in sore trouble—one with a spirit which rebelled at a task to which it was set should cry for aid, would Zitu give heed?"

O girl of gold, sang the heart in Croft's breast—O wonder-woman of all the universe of life! How well he knew her meaning. How well he sensed that in his words of promise for a future strength in her nation which would render needless her living immolation on the altar of patriotic duty, she saw a possible answer to that prayer she had lifted to Zitu, and Ga, and Azil the Giver of Life. And, how he longed to turn and sweep her supple form into his arms, crush it against his breast and speak to her soul the words which should assure her that he stood even now between her and the coming fate she loathed.

As it was he sought to reassure by his reply. "Yes, Naia of Aphur, I think that indeed Zitu hears a troubled spirit's prayer. As for the form his answer may take—what man knows?"

Her lips parted. "Aye, who knows," she repeated. "How long a time shall it require to bring these things to pass?"

"They shall be Aphur's before a cycle has run out," said Croft.

"Zitu! Then—then Aphur shall be strong beyond Jadgor's dreams ere—ere so short a time is gone!"

Again Croft's heart pounded in his breast. Almost she had said ere—she was forced into hated wedlock with Kyphallos, he thought. He inclined his head.

"But why," Naia went on more calmly, "being of Nodhur, did you come with these plans to Aphur, my lord?"

"You have said it." Croft turned to face her fully.

"I?" She drew herself a trifle back as in surprise.

"Yes. Because I am *your* lord." Croft did not hesitate now.

And suddenly he saw once more that strange, startled look of half recognition which had leaped at him over the rim of the silver goblet the night of the betrothal feast. "*My* lord?" Naia began and faltered and came to a pause.

"Aye—yours." Croft bent toward her. "Because I knew of you—and so knowing, knew you the one woman in all Tamarizia, or in all the worlds Zitu has made, whom I wished to possess as wife. Because I love you, Naia, Princess of

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Aphur. Because you are mine, and I yours, and have been since Zitu himself sent our two souls to dwell in the flesh. Because your flesh cries to mine, your soul calls to mine, your spirit seeks to be one with mine, as mine with yours. Therefore forgetting caste and all else, came I to Aphur and to you. Caste I have overridden and risen above. Think you I shall let Cathur stand between me and the heaven of your lips, the soft prison of your arms?"

FOR one wild instant while he spoke he thought her about to answer word for word. For she smiled. The thing started in her eyes and spread in a slow, divine wonder to her lips. Then, she sprang swiftly to her feet and faced him tensely erect, both voice and figure vibrant as she cried: "Stop! Jasor of Nodhur, you forget yourself. Think you so lightly of my plighted word, that you dare to address me thus? To Cathur I am pledged. To a maid of Tamarizia—or a woman of my house, and to all the courts of our nation that promise is sacred, not to be broken or put aside, save by an act of Zitu himself—save it be broken by death."

Croft had risen, too. "An act of Zitu," he said as she paused. "And may not my coming to Aphur in itself be an answer to your prayer for deliverance from the embraces of Cathur's unworthy heir?"

"My prayer?" Some of the resentful tension left Naia's form. "What know you—"

"I know much," Croft cut her short. "Am I dull of comprehension not to sense the name of her who prayed to Zitu in her travail? And what should wring such prayers from your flower-sweet breast, save that defilement it is planned to bring about, to add to Aphur's strength?"

Once more she flamed before him. "Were I to speak your words to Lakkon or to Jadgor, it would mean your death," she hissed.

"Then speak them—if you wish, beloved." Croft smiled.

As quickly as she had threatened, she drooped now at his words. Something akin to fear came into her eyes. "Who are you—" she began in the voice of a child.

"One who loves you," said Croft. "Who has loved you always—who always will. One whom you love—"

"Hold!" Once more she checked him.

But he shook his head. "What need of the sacrifice—when I shall give Aphur and all Tamarizia that strength they would purchase now with you?"

"Yet for that strength your price would be the same."

"Nay—" Croft denied, "unless it were paid gladly."

"And if it were not?"

"Still would I give Tamarizia strength."

Suddenly Naia of Aphur smiled. To Croft it seemed that she was well pleased with his answer. But barely had her lips parted as though for some further reply, than the Mazzerian passed toward the outer doors of the court.

The princess's whole expression altered. "My father comes. I cannot speak further concerning this matter now. Did he dream of our discussion, there would be no bounds to his wrath. Did he know that I could consider such things, Zitu himself might not quench his rage."

"Yet will you consider them, my Naia. You will give me an answer."

"Later," she told him quickly. "I—we may not discuss it further now—my lord."

CHATER XVI

THE WOMAN'S ANSWER

HOURS later Croft looked from the windows of his room. The evening had been spent in a far more formal fashion than the late afternoon. Lakkon had come in. He had welcomed his guest. Naia had gone to her rooms to dress for the evening meal. They had dined. Over the meal Croft had described again his plans, to the flattering attention of his host. Naia had lingered with them for a time, now and then meeting Croft's glance with a smile of her crimson lips before she had gone to her room.

Now as he leaned from his window he found all the garden beneath him, the mountain valley, the lake flooded in the light of the Palosian moons. The night called to him, and his heart was too full, his brain too busy with thought, to feel the spell of sleep. Drawing back he left his apartment, passed down the balcony corridor to the small door giving onto the garden stair and ran quickly down.

The breath of flowering shrubs was about him. Light and shadow filled the place with a quiet beauty. Choosing a path which ran off before him he strolled along. So by degrees he approached the white walls of the garden bath, doubly white now in the night. And having approached them he paused. The sound of a gentle splashing came from within.

Croft smiled. Another had felt the

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call of the outside world beside himself, and surely he felt that he knew who that one was. "Princess," he called softly, from beside the entrance screen.

"Aye." The word came as soft as his own and was followed by a gentle laugh. "Wait, Jasor of Nodhur." There came a louder sound of movement, followed by a silence, and then: "And now my lord you may come."

Croft passed the screen. The maiden stood before him. Her hair was coiled about her head. Her shoulder and arms showed glistening in the moonlight from the moisture of her skin.

"Naia," said the man.

"My lord." She smiled.

"Nay—call me Jasor at least," he returned.

"Jasor," said she.

They were alone—a man and a maid. The white walls of the bath shut them in from all prying eyes. The pool lay silvered by the moonlight beneath them.

And suddenly, Croft reached out toward her and swept her into his arms. That bold spirit which was his brooked no longer delay. He drew her to him. His arms sensed the lithe coolness of her figure as its dampness struck through the single garment, hastily donned at his call. So he held her and sensed all her maddening presence. "Mine!" he cried, pressing her close in the circle of his arms. "Mine! Woman whom Zitu himself has made for me."

"Hush." Her hand fell over his lips, and he felt her tremble. "Jasor, how knew you I was here?"

"I knew not until the night called me into the garden and I heard the sound of the water," he replied. "Then your presence told me of itself and I spoke your name."

There was a stone seat at one end of the pool. She led him there and seated herself at his side. "You are bold," she said, speaking quickly. "Jasor, I came here to think—as I have thought ever since we spoke together today."

"And having thought, will you give me my answer now?"

She lifted her eyes, dark in the silver night. "Can you truly do those things you spoke of?" she questioned him again as she had questioned before.

"Do you doubt it?" he questioned in reply.

"Nay, I think not. You would do all you say—for me?"

"All and more, for you, or to save you a sorrow," Croft said.

"Think you," said she, "that Kyphallos of Aphur is aught to me?"

"No," Croft laughed. "I know you hate him, Princess—name him the beast he is."

"You know much," she said in response and her voice was vibrant with a tone he had never heard her use before. "Yet things there may be you know not of. Listen, my lord. My lips touched not the wine in the silver goblet the night of the betrothal feast."

"Naia!" Croft came to his feet.

Naia of Aphur rose also. Her eyes were stars in the night. She stood before him a slender, swaying shape. She put forth her hands. "My eyes looked into yours above the goblet," she said softly, still in that strange new tone. "They forbade my lips to drink. Hence, Jasor, this is my answer—I am yours can you win me in time."

And now she came into his arms of her own volition. Croft found her upon his breast, clinging to him with her slender hands, looking up into his face. Some way his face sank to meet hers. Some way his mouth found her lips.

Then she had torn her mouth away. "Zitu, what have I done?" she cried. "No maid of Aphur may touch the lips of a man not of her bood, unless she is his bride. But—but—this thing is stronger than I. Days span the time since I have known you, yet Zitu knows it seems I have known you always—have waited for you to come, and knew it not, until that night when your glance met mine and told me I was yours. Jasor of Nodhur, you *must* save me—win me—now."

"Aye, I shall win you." Once more Croft claimed her lips and she did not resist. A mad exaltation filled him. He had won—Naia of Aphur. She lay in his arms. She had given him more than a maid of her race had any right to give according to convention's code. No question then but that her heart which beat so wildly against his breast, beat with the pulse of love. He had won—and he would win, not only this, but all that she could give.

"Swear it," she panted when once more her lips were free. "O Zitu, swear I shall be wholly yours. Think you I could yield to Kyphallos now? Nay—I had rather die."

"I swear," said Croft. "And tomorrow I shall return to Himyra and my work."

"Tomorrow." Disappointment rang in her tones. "When I have counted each day until you should come."

"Himyra is not far in the car already made," Croft said ignoring her ingenuous confession. "I shall come to you again—aye, again and again."

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"Yet must we be discreet," Naia exclaimed. "You must come—I *must* see you—but we must keep this secret in our hearts. Did Lakkon dream that Naia had dared to break her spoken pledge—" She paused. A tremor shook her as she leaned against him with his arm about her waist.

"YOU must return to your room," he urged. "Fear not. Yet when you pray, ask of Zitu that he give me speed and knowledge in my work. And should you not see or hear from me for a time, be sure that all I do is for you, that you are ever in my thoughts."

"As you will be in mine." Once more she turned to face him. "Yet before I go in now, my lord, give me again your lips."

"Beloved!" Croft held her a final moment and saw her depart.

Himself he lingered by the pool. His soul was on fire. He had won! Naia of Aphur in her soul was his. The soft warmth of her lips still lingered upon his own. Aye, he had won—her surrender to himself. That final kiss showed how complete that surrender was. So complete was it, that she had overstepped all the code of her nation and caste in order to give it expression, had placed herself where, should her act be learned, she would stand before her people disgraced.

Nor was his love less than hers. It was a great love, which had brought him to this time—so great, so all compelling, he felt now that even in his student days in India it had drawn him in a strange, subconscious fashion not then understood—so great that for it he had dared the unknown, to find the feminine complement of his spirit, whom tonight he had held within his arms.

No mere lure of the flesh was his divine passion, which had drawn him and fired him now to a resolution to work, work for it and it alone, until he had won not only Naia's love, but Naia as well. She had said the thing was stronger than herself. Croft knew it was stronger than himself as he sat beside the moonlit pool. It was one of those great loves, which have made history before this and will again. Hence tomorrow he would go back to Himyra, and there he would work and plan.

And, thought Croft, he must spy upon Cathur's prince, in the way only he could compass so far as he knew. Kyphallos must be in Scira now, unless he had gone back to Anthra. Kyphallos must be watched. There was that trip to Niera he had promised Kalamita to make. Would he tell her what had occurred in Himyra? And if so, what would Zollaria's Magnet of white flesh do? That she felt any emotion for Kyphallos other than as a pawn to her hand, Croft did not believe. He knew her type, and frankly he believed her an agent of her nation set to enshare the heir of Cathur and further Zollaria's plans. He nodded his head and rose. He would find this Cathurian prince and see what he did, and where at present he was.

Quickly he went back to his own apartment and laid himself on the couch. Naia he fancied was lying so even now in that room where Azil lifted his carved white wings beside her mirror pool. He smiled. Some day he promised his heart, his empty arms, they should not lie apart, but together, on a moonlit Palosian night.

Then he put all that out of his mind and fixed its full power on his task. Swifty that conscious entity which was the real man flitted across the Central Sea, and found itself in the palace of Scythys, the Cathurian king. About it he prowled, invisible and unseen by the nodding palace guards. And in it he found no sign of Scythys's son.

Once more he flitted free. To Abbu he went and found the monk asleep in a room of the Scira pyramid. And from there he flashed to Anthra, and found the gilded galley of the fickle youth tied up in the harbor basin, and Kyphallos lost in dalliance with a slender and beautiful dancer. He turned away with disgust; yet not before he learned that Kyphallos went to Niera tomorrow, as he had promised Kalamita he would do more than a month before.

BACK to his chamber and the body of Jasor of Nodhur went Croft. At least now he was satisfied that he could watch Kyphallos and mark his every move. Then let Kyphallos beware. He gave a final glance to the moon-flooded night and slept.

And in the morning he entered the motor and ran back to Himyra before the heat of the day. Work—work. That was to be his motto for the golden days to come. But first he must again return to earth.

That day, therefore, he spent in coaching Robur toward keeping the work moving on the engines. Also he requested that he have a great shop erected beyond the one they were using to expedite the work, and drew for him the

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plans for a sort of dock, wherein motors might be installed in a number of ships.

"Why give these to me?" Robur asked after Croft had explained.

"Since, that tonight, Rob, I shall fall into the sleep of which I have told you," Croft replied.

"Zitu! You feel it upon you?" Robur half started back.

"Yes."

"And it will last for how long a time?"

"I know not," said Croft. "It shall endure until I am possessed of the next means for making Aphur strong. Do you remember your promise to guard my body well?"

"It shall be well guarded, my strange friend," Robur promised again.

Yet that night a sudden panic seized upon Croft. What, he asked himself, if some unknown peril should threaten Naia while he was studying munition-making on earth? He considered that for a time, before he saw a way around. And then he sought out Gaya, and finding her alone as luck would have it, explained to her as he had explained to Robur before the nature of his coming sleep.

She heard him wide-eyed, and before she could break forth in comment Croft went on. "But Gaya, wife of my friend, should any peril or danger threaten Naia, daughter of Lakkon, the cousin of your lord, and I be still asleep—come quickly to me and bend to whisper, 'Naia needs you' and I promise I shall awake."

Gaya gave him a wide-eyed, startled glance. "Her name will rouse you from this sleep of deathlike seeming?" she exclaimed.

"Aye," Croft smiled. Gaya's expression had told him in a flash that she understood. "Wife of my friend, I think her name might wake me from death itself."

"Jasor!" Gaya cried. "My lord—can this thing be?"

"That my heart lies at her pink nailed feet?" Croft retorted. "Aye."

"Yet is she pledged to Cathur." Gaya grew swiftly pale. "Jasor, my good lord—and you love her, speak not concerning it to any other save myself. I swear by Zitu to keep your words in my heart. Do you control your tongue."

Croft smiled into her troubled face again. "My tongue I may control," he declared. "But my heart can I not curb in its mad passion for the maid, nor make it less rebel against this plighted troth."

"Robur approves not of it, nor I," Gaya told him softly. "Love brought Milidhur and Aphur together. But—this—this of—of other design." And suddenly she knit her well-formed brows. "Jasor," said she speaking very quickly; "you are strong—you have thoughts above other men, and something tells me the maid would lie happy in your arms."

Croft sprang to his feet. "You would approve it, Gaya, my sweet friend?" he exclaimed with flashing eyes.

"I am a woman," she replied in almost breathless fashion. "Naia loathes this Cathurian prince."

"And a cycle lies before us, ere he claims her for his own," Croft smiled.

"What mean you?" Gaya half rose. Her hand lifted to her breast.

"Nay." Croft shook his head. "I cannot tell you. "Yet, as you say, I am strong, and I shall make Aphur and Tamarizia strong as myself and stronger a thousand fold. Remember, therefore, the words I have told you to speak, and say them close in my ear, in case any need should arise."

CHAPTER XVII

THE TEUTONS IN THE SKY

NAIA! Naia of Aphur would lie happy in his arms. And by Zitu! Some day she should. This was for her. Croft laid himself on his couch and fell into that deathlike sleep of the body, he had learned so well to produce.

But his spirit fled across the Central Sea to Niera, willing itself into the presence of Cathur's heir wherever he might be.

He found him in the room of a red stone palace overlooking the sea from the terraced side of the shore on which it stood. He lay on a copper couch, covered with silken cloth of a clear pure yellow, and he wore an expression of sullen pique upon his face.

For he was not alone. Nor was this his private apartment as Croft understood in a glance. It was the suite of Kalamita herself. And the tawny beauty was present in quite shameless fashion, plainly preparing herself for some coming function as it appeared from the litter of feminine articles of toilet which lay on the red wood table at which she sat.

"Nay—think you I have no other source of information beyond your own rosy lips, good Kyphallos," she broke forth in an almost taunting voice; "or that I know not men for what they are? This flower of Aphur is pretty as I have

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heard, as Bzad who has disguised himself and journeyed to Himyra as a common sailor and seen her, tells me of his own knowledge. Also it comes to my ears that you drank too deeply of the Aphurian wine. A drunkard and a pretty fleshly toy. Zitemque himself never fashioned a stronger design for the making of trouble and fools. Think you I cannot understand?"

Kyphallos frowned. "One would think you Gayana," he grumbled as Kalamita paused.

She shrugged. "Nay, I am no priestess of Ga, nor a virgin as you know. Nor do I ask that you look no less clay. What are your pastimes with dancers and women of the people to me? Yet Kalamita gives not herself to be cast aside for a woman of Aphur's choosing—or a woman of equal rank."

So that was it, thought Croft. Kyphallos was in this woman's power indeed. And now Kyphallos quitted his couch and crossed to her side. He caught her and raised her in his arms. "You are the fool!" he cried. "Yet by Zitu, I delight to see you heated, by word of another than yourself. Listen—and this time believe. I found myself in a trap of Jadgor's devising, as I have said. Had I refused this rite of betrothal, how think you he would have looked upon my act? Could I allay all suspicion of those things which shall bring you queen to Zitra's throne in better fashion than to accept?

"Think not all the wisdom of mankind lies wrapped in your beauteous head. Kyphallos of Cathur, is no more a fool than another. Hence I stand pledged to Naia, of Aphur, whom Bzad himself may have for a toy, should he wish, so long as I keep Kalamita in my arms. Thus have I gained the time of a cycle for the further perfecting of my plans."

"This is the truth?" A flash of selfish satisfaction crept into the woman's eyes.

"Aye—as I tell you. Small need of your spies in Aphur to bring you word. Myself, I left a spy to find out the secret of this new car which runs itself, as I told you. Aye—Cathur, too, knows how to plan."

Croft felt a thrill of humor at the words. He knew well what had happened to Cathur's spy. He watched while Kalamita freed herself from Kyphallos's embrace and began loading herself with jewels.

"And how does Cathur plan when the cycle is run out?" she inquired at length. "What of this pledge with Aphur, then?"

"Zollaria will be ready—then," Kyphallos said.

Zollaria would be ready. The thing was plotted then, arranged. There was a full understanding between Kyphallos and the nation which had used this beautiful vampire to bait its trap.

"And if not?" she said.

"The pledge can be forsworn—and Aphur can do what she likes."

"Your father?"

"Knows not his own mind from day to day, as you yourself know. Even now he speaks of giving me the throne."

Kalamita smiled. "Yet Bzad says Naia is very fair." She narrowed her eyes.

"Bzad speaks truth, yet have I not come straight to you as I said on my return?"

"Aye. Good then my lord. Tonight let us speak as one of this journey to the south. Myself, I shall seem as one who knows and understands, and am satisfied in all that has occurred. Do you maintain your action solely to gain time and allay all suspicion in Aphur's mind. Tonight shall you know Zollaria's final plans which shall bring you to Zitra's throne." She rose and stood before him. "Do you love me indeed, my lord?"

"Yes, by Zitu!" Kyphallos's voice was thickened. He reached out eager hands.

But Kalamita laughed. "Not Kyphallos alone may pledge himself for reasons of State," she taunted, drawing back. "I also have given my troth to another since you left."

"You!" For an instant the Cathurian seemed bereft of further power of speech. He grew deadly pale. Then the red blood surged back into his face. It grew dark, with a deadly passion. He sprang forward and seized her by her jewel-banded arms, holding her in a grip she might not resist. "What mean you? Say quickly your words are a jest, or, by Zitu and Azil, you shall find no time before I crush in your unfaithful breast!"

It came over Croft that the Cathurian loved her—with such love as a man of his type could give; that for her he was ready to sacrifice honor and country and all a true man would hold sacred; that this explained all he had so far heard. And it came into his mind that the woman was in danger.

But she smiled in mockery into the threatening face. "For reasons of State, my lord," she said.

"What?" Kyphallos caught a breath.

Kalamita loosened his grip on her arms, carried his arms downward beside her and drew them about her form. "Plans have gone forward since you departed for the south. When all is ready you shall invite me to Anthra—and once in your power you shall refuse to permit my return. Zollaria, and he to whom I

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am pledged, shall demand it, and still shall you refuse. Then shall Zollaria wage war on Cathur and Cathur shall appeal to Tamarizia for aid. And since Cathur guards the gate to the Central Sea and her loss would spell the downfall of a thousand cycles of power that aid may not be refused."

The rape of Helen—the seige of Troy. Woman—woman—the source of life and the cause of so much death. Croft felt his senses swirl as he saw the subtle way in which nothing less than a war of conquest had been planned and practically assured.

KYPHALLOS spoke. "And Cathur's unprepared army, thanks to Tamhys's thoughts of peace, and of others before him, shall scarcely stop the armies Zollaria has trained and armed and taught for fifty years. Then shall Kyphallos and Kalamita mount the throne of Zitra, and—"

"Naia!" Once more the woman taunted with a smile.

"Bzad can have her, if he takes her," Kyphallos cried.

Bzad—the blue Mazzerian chief! Naia to a savage! Croft's spirit quivered and shook with a righteous rage. The last vestige of any compunction he might have held against leading the girl to declare her passion for himself disappeared.

"Not an impossible fate," he heard Kalamita speaking and noted a crafty light creep into her yellow eyes. "Come, then. Let us descend. Play your part strongly, my lord, and all, I think, shall be well."

Croft followed them downstairs to the court where a table was spread. Save Kalamita herself the guests were wholly men. He recognized Bandhor, her brother, and the Mazzerian Bzad. The others, plainly Zollarians and men of Mazzer by their appearance and speech, were as yet unknown to him.

The appearance of the Zollarian Magnet and her captive victim was a signal for all to take their seats. Thereafter, as the meal progressed, Croft learned the final details of the plan.

It was mainly such as he had already conceived save that the Mazzerian nation was to aid Zollaria in the war of annexation she planned. For this Mazzeria was to be given a seaport on the Central Sea and free use of a river leading from it through the state of Bithur, as well as the eastern half of Bithur itself. War would be made by Mazzeria on the eastern frontier, while Zollaria threw her main force against Cathur and crushed her smaller army by sheer force of weight.

"Thus," said one of the party, a man unknown to Croft, yet one, he felt, could be no less than a representative of the Zollarian ruler himself from the deference paid him by the others, "shall Zollaria make good that freedom of the seas she has long desired, and prove her good faith and her friendship for our Mazzerian allies to the east. Thus shall Zollaria and Tamarizia become one nation, with Cathur to rule the southern half. As for the fashion in which our good Prince Kyphallos met Aphur's plans, it is well. For since war is to be the outcome of all our planning, what matters one pledge broken more or less?"

This was Zollarian statecraft, Croft thought. This was the weight of Zollaria's word. This was the right of might. To take what she wished, to trick, betray, seduce, that she might gain her ends thereby. Nothing which mankind held sacred was sacred to her, it appeared. She sent a royal woman of easy morals to lure Cathur into a snare. She would make this tawny enchantress her final excuse for war. She was callous, overbearing, greedy of power, gross save for a surface seeming of culture she used as a mask—behind which lurked the true nature which inspired her plans and acts. To her Kyphallos would sell his birthright, his state, his nation, for the favor of the wanton beside him and a place upon a secondary throne.

And it was Kyphallos who spoke now. "And thus shall Kalamita be queen at Zitra when all is done! A toast to Kalamita now!"

"To Kalamita, queen of women now. Queen of Zitra later!" the unknown noble cried and lifted a goblet brimming with wine.

"To Kalamita!" the party drank.

"And now," said the unknown, rising and lifting the goblet above his head, "another toast, my friends. To those things we have planned and their fruition. To—the day—whenever it shall be!"

"To the day!" They drank it standing.

Bandhor, in whose palace Croft judged the conference has occurred, clapped his hands sharply and a band of dancers trooped in.

Croft left. He had learned all he had hoped and more. He knew now what Tamarizia faced—war. And he knew more. He knew that Naia, of Aphur, was his! He knew that Cathur meant to forswear her—that there would be no need on his part to win her other than by winning this war. His part now to arm Aphur, Nodhur, Milidhur—so much of

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Tamarizia as he could in the space of a year. His part to bring disaster to these carefully laid plans of a greedy nation and a traitor prince.

That was his work. It was best he should be about it. To do what he must the time was painfully short. Turning his mind upon the first step which should lead him to its completion, he focused his mind upon it with all his power and left Palos for the earth.

CHAPTER XVIII

"ARMS AND THE MAN"

TWO WEEKS went by before he once more opened the eyes of Jasor's body and found himself in a guarded room in the palace of Aphur's king.

He had spent them on earth in the study of firearms and munitions and the various devices required for making the same. Now he returned with a consciousness full of designs and an urgent desire to attempt their carrying out.

He sat up. "List, soldier, I would drink!" he announced.

The guard inside the door of his chamber started, shot a quick glance toward his bed, and approached none too swiftly, Croft thought. The man actually seemed afraid. "Wine!" he snapped, seeking to overcome the first shock induced by his words.

"Aye, my lord." The guard turned to the door and set it open. "Wine!" he bawled. "The Lord Jasor awakes!"

"My clothes." Croft left his couch.

Ten minutes later a rap fell on the door. Robur appeared. Word of Croft's waking had spread. The prince himself came with a page bringing wine. Croft drank: "I would see Jadgor at once," he declared.

"He sleeps," Prince Robur began.

"Then wake him. All Tamarizia totters to a fall unless we be ready in less than a single cycle, Rob."

"Zitu!" Robur stared. "Say you truly. How know you this, Jasor, my friend?"

Croft turned and pointed toward his couch. "I was told while my body lay there," he said quickly. "You call on Zitu in vain unless you give heed to my words!"

"Nay, not so. Come," replied Aphur's prince. "I myself shall take you to my father without delay."

That was a strange night in Himyra of Aphur, pregnant with the destinies of a nation—and nothing less. Jadgor, no king in seeming now, but a stern-faced man in a simple garment sat upon his couch while Croft revealed his knowledge of what Zollaria planned.

"By Zitu!" he roared at the end, "would Cathur dare this thing?"

"Aye—for the woman and Zitra's throne," said Croft.

"To foreswear his pledge to Aphur?"

"Aye."

"To surrender his state?"

"Aye—that too, Jadgor the king."

And suddenly Jadgor was king indeed despite the disadvantage of position and clothes. "Then let Zilla the Destroyer take me unless we meet them, spear to spear and sword to sword! Jasor of Nodhur, I understand you not—nor yet how your knowledge is obtained save Zitu speaks through you as a mouthpiece for his own designs. Yet know I that what you say falls out. Wherefore I shall once more heed your words. This falls on Aphur, Nodhur, Milidhur, I think, with Tamhys, man of peace on Zitra's throne. Yet shall Aphur, Nodhur, and Milidhur prepare. Inside a cycle, should we work together, we shall have a very horde of ready spears and swords."

"Nay, scarcely that," said Croft.

"What else?" Jadgor stared.

"Stronger weapons than those, for which I bring the plans. If made in time, a thousand men instructed in their use, can end this war almost before it starts. Let Aphur, Milidhur, and Nodhur plan together, that these weapons may be produced some in Himyra and some in Ladhra. The work is vast. Yet shall the final end be sure if this is done before Zollaria strikes. Robur and I shall undertake the carrying out of my designs, if Jadgor gives the word."

"Then Jadgor gives it," said the king. "On Nodhur will I call and Milidhur. No man may say that Aphur failed to think of Tamarizia's good. For though I see that should you do this thing your name will stand above all others in the state—I love my nation more than I love either fame or rank. Hence, Nodhur, make your weapons for this coming trial of strength, and I shall give you moneys, metals, men—all things you may require."

Croft's heart swelled in his breast. Had he ever doubted Jadgor's patriotic motives for a moment, those doubts died now as he heard him lay aside those dreams of imperial rank he knew had once been his. And in that moment there was born within his brain the plan he was fated to carry out—a plan which would make Tamhys the last emperor of Tamarizia, and after him no other ever again. "Then," he accepted the king's assurance, "Robur and I shall plan that

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this work may start at once. Aphur, I crave your pardon for having broken your sleep."

That was the beginning of Croft's real work. Oddly enough, on a planet where he had come upon seeming peace, his first task outside the original motor was in preparing for war; and even the motor entered largely into that.

AT ONCE he plunged into a very frenzy of action, almost appalled himself by the amount to be done inside a year. That first night he spent with Robur drafting to his attentive ears those things which they must do—the finishing of the motors—their installation in ships.

"The structure for that end is well-nigh completed," Robur said.

"Good!" Croft cried, and went on swiftly to demand the construction or appropriation of buildings for the making of arms. As to the nature of the latter, he held back the details for the time, and spoke of preparing a fleet of swift motor-driven galleys in which to transport the troops they would raise across the Central Sea when the need should arise.

Robur's eyes sparkled at that. "We shall come upon them ere they dream we can arrive. Jasor, my friend, your name shall be greatest among Tamarizia's men."

"No greater than that of Jadgor," Croft replied. "Rob, your father is a man above other men. None save a man of noble spirit forgets himself to assure his nation's good."

In the month that followed Croft did many things. He began the training of a number of men in assembling the motors, choosing only such as seemed peculiarly adapted to the work. He installed a motor in a galley and drove the craft through Himyra along the Na at a speed which had never been seen in a ship in Palos before. In this, with Jadgor himself and Lakkon, whom he persuaded to bring Naia along, he journeyed on up the river to make his long-promised visit to Jasor's parents at Ladhra and enlist Belzor, King of Nodhur, in their plans.

Sinon and Mellia scarcely knew how to take him they thought their son.

"By Zitu! You have done it!" Sinon cried as he rode the galley across the Na's yellow flood.

Later, loaded with honors, both by Jadgor and Belzor himself, he grew abashed. "That my son should raise me to noble station," he faltered to Mellia at his side. "Strange days are coming to Tamarizia, wife of my heart, when he who was a dullard sits in the council of the kings."

For Croft had appeared before Belzor inside the first day after Ladhra was reached. And Belzor, startled by the fact of a galley which ran up the turgid current of the mighty river without oars or sails, had listened to him and Jadgor and joined his support to their plans. That settled, he arranged with Sinon to send several galleys to Himyra to be equipped with motors, and returning to that city for a few days, dropped down stream, entered the Central Sea, and sailed to the capital city of Milidhur.

On this trip Gaya made one of their party, and though Croft perforce acted as engineer, he managed more than one word with Naia during the course of the voyage, and once the fleeting bliss of a stolen kiss.

In Milidhur, Gaya's voice helped to turn the tide to Jadgor and Croft. A princess of state, she brought all her influence to bear. And since Milidhur was asked only to form a part of the army, to be equipped before Zollaria struck, the matter was soon arranged.

Back in Himyra at length, Croft found the work on the motors progressing swiftly under Robur's direction and at once began the actual construction of machines for the fashioning of arms. Now and then he stole away for an evening and drove out to Lakkon's mountain palace for a meal. Not only did he find pleasure in the going, but Naia pleaded for the all too short hours they managed to spend together, and to Croft it seemed that each time he brought back from her presence a freshened and driving energy to his work.

That work progressed. Of that progress he spoke to her from time to time. And always she spurred him on with eyes and lips through the task at the end of which she herself was the waiting and willing prize.

DAY and night the fire of creation flared in Himyra, and so soon as work was started, and he had shown Robur how to keep busy the many men Jadgor had furnished for their needs, Croft put some of the new motors into commission between Himyra and Ladhra and started other work there, in a mighty building set apart by Belzor for his use. Those necessary bits of machinery first installed in the Himyra shops he had made, like the motor parts were now made, in numbers.

Sinon's first galley up the Na carried as its cargo partly assembled engines of queer design to a Palosian mind, which should when set up in the shops at Ladhra fulfil their portion of Croft's plan.

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Thereafter the fires of the new era flared in Ladhra, too, and Croft spent his time between the two shops, motoring back and forth mainly at night, regardless of the loss of sleep until he should have everything running smoothly.

Twenty of the hundred cars which were gradually taking shape he set apart, however, after they were tested—and these he had equipped with all-metal wheels carrying cross-bars on their tires like short, strong teeth. He put workmen to the task of making metal walls to bolt upon each chassis. And these walls were pierced with slots. Thus he arranged for twenty armored cars and had them set aside. Likewise he speeded the construction of numbers of flat-bottomed power-boats capable of speed, yet having floor space enough to transport no small number of men.

A month passed, two months, three. Always the fires in Ladhra and Himyra flared. Men toiled day and night. Croft's plans were drawn for each part of the arm he intended to make. Machines were assembled and set up—motors were harnessed to them to Robur's amazement. Croft found the Tamarizians apt of comprehension and willing to work. Each man employed was sworn to fealty to the State. Each knew himself a member in an army working for the safety of the nation. At the end of three months he found himself the supreme captain of a picked corps. And at the end of a month he was ready to begin the actual making of arms.

Now and then Croft went back to his earthly body, not only to renew its physical life, but to gain help in the work he was carrying on by learning fresh details on each trip. He gave up any intention of manufacturing machine guns, as a thing requiring too much time. On an average he spent two days of every week on earth. His sleeps on Palos had become too frequent to cause any further comment when they occurred. Thus a fourth month passed.

In it Croft accomplished several things. He did not stop motor production with the first hundred. He continued their building and began selling the output of the shops to private owners. The things became a not too unusual sight on the Himyra streets, and the first motor caravan was organized and crossed the inland desert to Milidhur with success.

One special car Croft had built. On it he lavished all his present ability of refinement. And when it was done he drove it to Lakkon's mountain mansion in the twilight of a busy day. It was for Naia, and himself he gave it to her, and after the evening meal when the three moons rose he placed her in it and taught her how to drive.

Far down the mountain road and out upon the desert between the foot of the hills and Himyra they went. They were alone in the soft light which turned the dun plain to silver. Far off the red fires in Croft's workshops flared over Himyra's walls.

Croft stopped the car and pointed to that red reflection in the lesser light. Suddenly it seemed to him that in all the world there were just they two—that they were alone—that nothing else mattered. His heart swelled.

"For you!" he said, and drew Naia into his arms, and against his breast. "For you!" He kissed her on eyes and lips. "To free you and give you to me always. Those fires are burning away all need of your sacrifice. In the end they shall make you mine."

"Yours." Naia sighed in his arms as one content. "Here in the desert you preserved my life. Why should it not belong to you?

"Your work progresses well?" she went on after a time.

"Beyond my hopes," Croft assured her. "Have no fear. All shall be ready—in time."

"My lord," she whispered.

"Aye —*your* lord, beloved," said Croft.

"Beloved," she repeated.

For a time Croft simply held her, and then he turned the car and drove back up the mountain road.

CHAPTER XIX

A SUMMONS FROM ZITRA

AT THE end of the fourth month the first rifle was done. It was an odd-appearing affair. Tempered copper took the place of earthly steel in barrel and other metal parts. Copper formed the shell for the ammunition, over which Croft had experienced more trouble than in anything else. Lead was very scarce on Palos. But there were vast quantities of gold. That explained the enormous use made of it in draperies and the common trades as he had learned.

Yet it was with some compunction due to the opposite conditions on earth and their life-long effect on his brain that he finally hit on an alloy from which the bullets were made. Powder had troubled him, too—though in the end he managed to make it. And for the fulminating centers of his cartridge complete, he was

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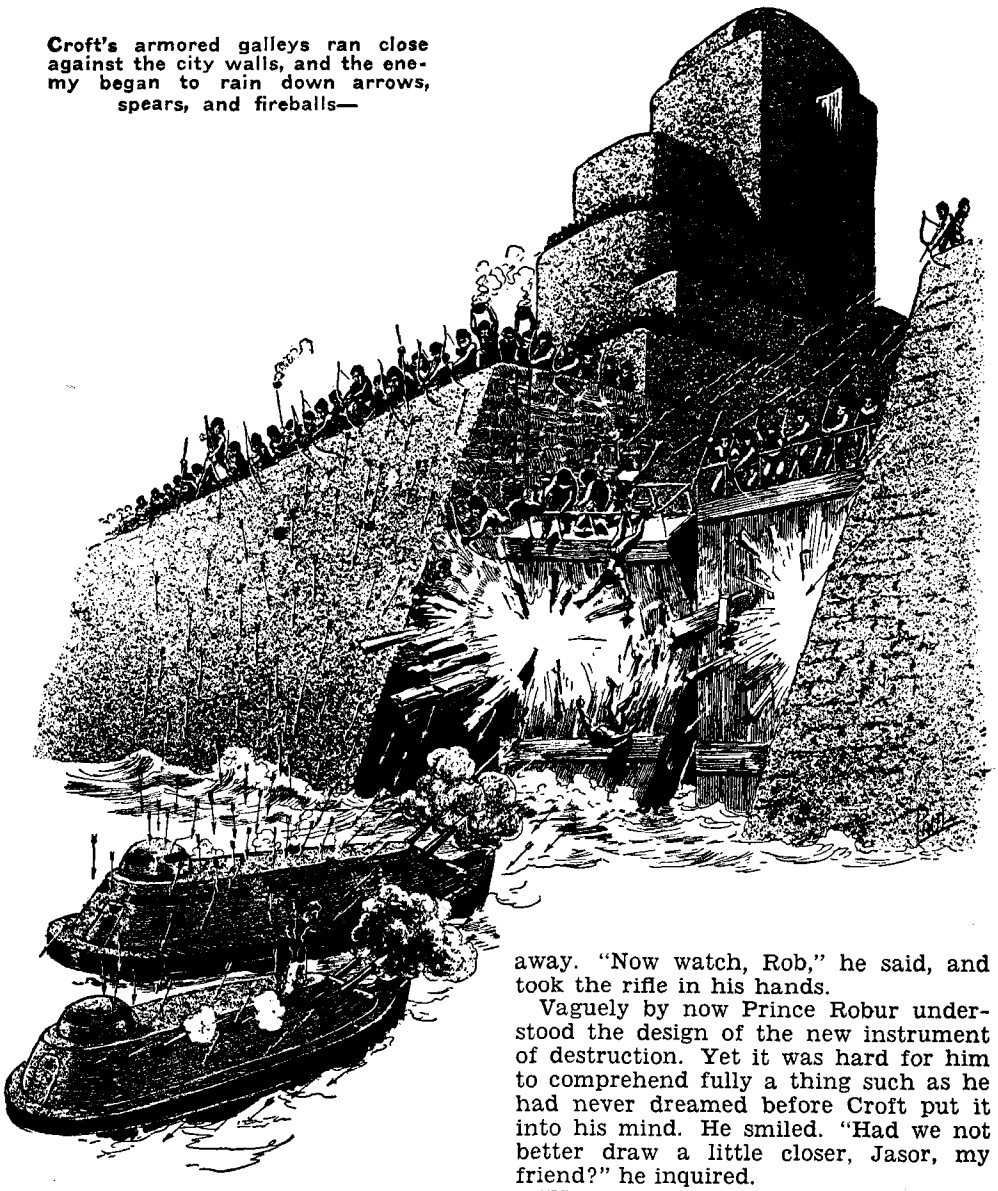
Croft's armored galleys ran close against the city walls, and the enemy began to rain down arrows, spears, and fireballs—



compelled to spend several days on earth.

In the end, however, he held the first completed weapon in his hands, and gloated over its finished lines. Taking Robur in a car, he drove out along the south road to a place where he knew vast flocks of water-fowl were wont to frequent the Na.

As a boy he had been a good shot, until such time as he waked in his soul a repugnance for killing the natural creatures the One Great Source had made, save as necessity arose.

He gestured to the wild fowl floating on the yellow water more than a bow-shot away. "Now watch, Rob," he said, and took the rifle in his hands.

Vaguely by now Prince Robur understood the design of the new instrument of destruction. Yet it was hard for him to comprehend fully a thing such as he had never dreamed before Croft put it into his mind. He smiled. "Had we not better draw a little closer, Jasor, my friend?" he inquired.

"No." On the word Croft fired. Nor did he fire blindly into the flock. He chose a bird swimming to one side. And hard on the sound of his shot that bird jerked in the spasmodic fashion of a sorely stricken thing, struggled for an instant and floated away, half sunk in the yellow tide.

The entire flock rose at the new strange sound on the silent air. They swarmed across the sky. Pumping up a fresh cartridge, Croft lifted his rifle swiftly, chanced another hit—and scored. One of the flying creatures checked its rapid course, slanted drunkenly downward and then spun dizzily over and over to fall

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not far from where the two men stood in the car.

"Zitu! Zitu!" Robur exclaimed, springing from the machine to retrieve the fallen bird. Croft watched him run toward it in very unprincelike haste. Then he was coming back with the dead thing in his hands, staring wide-eyed at the drops of blood on its feathers, lifting his face with a strange expression to Croft, as he climbed back to his seat.

"Are you convinced, Rob?" Croft laid the rifle aside.

"I am convinced Zitu himself but uses you as his agent. These things never came from a mortal brain alone," the Prince of Aphur replied.

"Man comes by Zitu's will, why should not Zitu use man for the things it pleases him to do?" said Croft.

"You do not deny it?" Robur spoke in almost startled fashion.

"Nay. Have I not already said that all I did was by Zitu's grace?" There were times when Croft found it hard to avoid a direct avowal of the actual state which was his, times when he hungered to make some human soul a confidant concerning all that had occurred. And he loved the strong young man by his side.

Now, however, Robur laughed in a somewhat unsteady way. "There are times when you cause me to stand in awe of your power, Jasor, my friend," he said.

"Think you not Zollaria will stand in awe of our weapons when they are in the hands of our men, on foot or mounted in the cars I have armored and pierced with holes for the barrels of the rifles?" Croft asked.

"Aye, by Zitu!" Robur shouted. "Turn around Jasor—and 'let her out.' We must return to our work."

BUT that night Croft drove out to the mountains, taking his rifle along. Others were being assembled now, and he had seen Jadgor himself and arranged for the beginning of the army they must raise. The thing would be started by a public demonstration, at which Croft should show the power of the new weapon. The men of Aphur, and Nodhur, and Milidhur would be invited to join. To each who did so a rifle would be given wholly as his property for all time to come, and a certain wage would be given also while they were being trained.

Fired by the thought, Croft asked for a copy of the Tamarizian alphabet, found it not unlike the ancient Maya inscriptions in Central America and had taken it to the shop and set his pattern-makers to forming molds for the making of type. He intended printing proclamations of the coming call for volunteers and posting them about the streets, where those who knew how to read might understand and impart the knowledge to their fellows.

Thus to his inventions he added the printing-press, crude, and for large work only at first, but printing none the less. He had taken all this up with Jadgor, and advised waiting another month, until many rifles were finished or being made, since the civic and royal guards would form the nucleus of the army and must be armed before a call for volunteers. Jadgor had listened to all he said, gazing at the dead water-fowl Robur had insisted on lugging into the palace. He examined the wound made by the bullet and agreed to all his son and Croft had asked. Now at the end of the day Croft was speeding forth to show the woman he loved the thing which should win for them their heart's desire, and wreck Zollaria's plans.

Lakkon himself met him as he descended at the door. Despite his resolve Croft's visits were growing more and more frequent and Lakkon was not a fool.

"My lord," he said, giving his hand, "what brings you again thus soon?"

Croft drew himself up. "Success," he returned. "I came but to prove to you the power of the first of the new weapons we have made. And having done so I shall return to Himyra so soon as I may."

"Nay." A trouble expression waked in Lakkon's eyes. "Take not my words amiss." He seemed suddenly abashed. "The weapon does all you said?"

"Aye. I shall show you and the princess, if I may."

Lakkon's eyes flashed. The meaning of this wonder-worker's statement if proved, which he did not doubt, swept all else out of his mind for the time. "What do you require?" he asked in a tense tone.

Croft glanced about. Below him near the lake in a mountain meadow were some of the strange sheeplike cattle, knee deep in grass. He gestured toward them with his hand. "Permission to slay one of those."

"Granted, so be you can do it," Lakkon smiled. The distance was twice the range of any bow.

Croft reflected the smile as he made answer. "If the princess may be summoned." He turned and took the rifle from the car.

Lakkon eyed it with unconcealed interest. He called the Mazzerian from within

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the door and directed that Naia be bidden to appear.

While they waited, Croft opened the magazine and extracted a bullet. He was explaining it to Lakkon when Naia hurried forth. "A powder within the shell furnishes the power to propel the ball in the end," he finished in time to greet her. "And now Prince Lakkon, to take you at your word." He lifted the shining barrel.

"What would you do?" Naia exclaimed.

"Behold," said Croft and fired.

Far below in the meadow one of the woolly creatures appeared to stumble, to stagger a pace or two forward before it sank into the grass.

"Zitu!" came Lakkon's voice.

Croft smiled.

Naia approached. Her face was devoid of color—as white as though the bullet had pierced her heart instead of the body of the unknowing sacrifice to developing science, now lying in swift dissolution beside the lake. Slowly she put forth a finger and touched the shining thing in Croft's hands. "This is the new weapon?" she said in a sibilant whisper, and lifted her face to his.

"Aye. And having shown Lakkon its power, I must return to Himyra." Croft turned toward the car. He hoped she would understand his abruptness, since after Lakkon's words he was afraid to meet the glance of her eyes.

"Return?" she cried protestingly. "Must you go so soon, my lord?"

"The need presses," Lakkon cut in. "Lord Jasor came but to show us the last fruits of his wonderful knowledge. I called you to witness the test. You need not remain."

"You see," he went on as Naia turned with a quivering lip and slowly mounted the stairs.

"What?" Croft met him eye to eye.

"That my daughter is a woman, Jasor of Nodhur, and that your name is a word on every tongue in Aphur, and that the princess is pledged to Cathur."

"Who will foreswear his pledge," Croft interrupted, knowing Jadgor must have told the counselor what they had discussed.

"If your words be true?"

"You doubt them?"

"Nay—yet Lakkon is a name of honor, and a pledge is a pledge until broken indeed."

"And should it be so broken?" Croft leaned a trifle toward him from the hips.

"Aphur would refuse you nothing," Prince Lakkon said.

Croft laughed as he sprang into his seat. "Forget not those words, Prince Lakkon," he flung back as he started the car.

HE drove to Himyra in a rage. Before him floated a vision of Naia's purple eyes gone black with hurt misunderstanding, of her quivering crimson lips. But his rage was as much with himself as with Lakkon, to tell the truth. He had been indiscreet after promising discretion. He had gone to the mountains too often. He had let eye and voice speak too plainly those things in his soul. Lakkon had been blind not to see what was ripening under his nose. And Lakkon was a man of honor according to his code.

He drove to the palace, found Gaya, and told her the whole thing from beginning to end.

"You mean that the maiden loves you?" she cried.

"Aye," Croft said.

"You have told her of your love?" Gaya seemed a bit breathless as she paused.

"Aye." Croft inclined his head.

"You are mad!"

"Nay—I am in love. It comes to the same thing." Croft smiled.

"Ga and Azil help you both," Gaya returned. "I can do nothing. And—you must not imperil her honor, my lord. But—I shall make it my task to see her and explain the manner of your return tonight, and," her color deepened swiftly, "to assure her of your love."

"Thank you, sweet Gaya." Croft rose. "You are a blessed hypocrite—and a true woman."

He bent and gripped her hand.

And Gaya smiled upon him because he was a strong man and she was a woman indeed.

For the rest as the days and weeks dragged away, Croft sought to drown himself in attention to his work. All day he toiled and oftentimes far into the night. Jasor's splendid physique stood him in good stead during the months of preparation.

There were no labor troubles in Aphur. The state fixed the scale of wages, and those who would not work were summarily sent to the mines to dig the metals needed by their more energetic fellow citizens. Thus the fifth month passed.

Rifles were being turned forth in a glittering array at Himyra and Ladhra and stored with their ammunition for the time of need. Croft finished his printing-press and struck from it the first bulletins which should appeal to the

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men of three states to come to their country's need.

"Citizens of Tamarizia," Croft wrote. "Shall Tamarizia weaken or grow strong? Recall the heritage your forebears left. Yours is the Central Sea. Yours is a government of the people, for the people, under liberal heads of state, who express the people's will as set forth once in a cycle by the state assemblies you by your votes elect. But a government by the people is strong only as the people themselves shall make it. Citizens make Tamarizia strong as never before.

"Let each man step to the fore and agree to serve as a soldier for one year. To each shall be given a weapon which he may keep. Ponder on this. If each year each man of good health and a certain age shall for one year win his weapon and learn concerning its use, how long before Tamarizia shall be so strong in the strength of her men that she shall be safe in the possession of the proud station those brave men your forefathers left to you in trust? Ask of your civic captains concerning this. Enroll yourself as citizens of Tamarizia under them."

These bulletins were posted in Aphur, Nodhur and Milidhur, and in the capital of each state a public demonstration of the new army weapon was held by a picked squad of Jadgor's royal guards whom Croft had taught to shoot. At each a herd of taburs was slaughtered, singly and in groups. All southwest Tamarizia gasped. The word flew from mouth to mouth. The stories fired men's hearts. They flocked to the captains of the city guards.

Croft began teaching the royal guard and the guard of Himyra, the school of the company and squad, marksmanship and a simple manual of arms. They learned quickly and inside a month he sent many of them as special instructors to all Aphur and the other southern states. Thus far things had progressed to the end of the ninth month, when the imperial throne at Zitra interfered. A messenger arrived, commanding Jadgor and all others responsible for the warlike activity in Aphur and Nodhur to appear before Tamhys with the least possible delay.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN THE EMPEROR HEDGED

THE thing was not unexpected to Croft. From the start he had feared some such event. Hence, without offering explanation to Jadgor he had taken steps to convince Magur of Himyra of the deathlike stupor in which his body lay at such times as he was absent from it.

He had gone on one occasion to the pyramid and deliberately left Jasor's form sitting in a chair, while he projected himself to Scira and found out Abbu, now for some months engaged in keeping watch on the moves of Cathur's prince. Returning to find Magur standing above him in something like awe, he had told exactly what Abbu was doing at the time, and requested Magur to verify his words in any fashion he chose.

Now faced by the imperial interference with all his plans, he called Magur to his aid. He took him to Zitra, with Jadgor, Lakkon and himself, making the journey quickly in a motor-driven craft and taking the messenger along.

Croft marveled at Zitra, despite all he had seen of Tamarizian architecture before. It rose crystal and silver and white, save that the temple of Zitu, surmounting a pyramid twice the size of that at Himyra was of an azure-blue stone—the color of the highest priesthood as he was to learn. The palace of Tamhys was a marvel to the eye—vaster than Himyra's mighty white structure built wholly of white and crystal and roofed with burnished silver, paved with alternate squares of silver, and crystal, and gold.

The thing was unbelievable, Croft felt. He moved as in a dream. This was the central city of empire, impregnable to any weapon then known on Palosian soil. Its walls rose sheer from the sea on the side which they approached. The harbor was within them. Sea gates closed the entrance with leaves of copper, covered by silver faces. The walls themselves were white. Darting through the gates their galley entered the gulf of a harbor smooth as glass wherein were mirrored the quays and structures along the water's edge. The cool green of trees banked the terraces and relieved the well-nigh blinding radiance created by the sun upon the glistening white. He forgot everything in the beauty of the vision and exclaimed aloud.

Magur watched him, well pleased. His pleasure grew as Croft turned and faced the monstrous pile of the pyramid and the pure blue temple on the top. They landed, and while the wharfmen were unloading a motor which Croft had brought as a present for Tamhys, and the messenger hurried to the palace to announce their arrival, he led Croft to one side.

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"I would have you meet Zud, High Priest of all Tamarizia," he said. "We who keep alive the love of Zitu in the hearts of the nation are not devoid of all material power, my friend."

Croft inclined his head. He had hoped for something of this sort; had planned for it, indeed. "I also serve Zitu in my way," he declared. "I should be honored to enter the presence of him he has seen fit to exalt to so high a degree."

An armed guard appeared, escorting a number of gnuppa-drawn chariots. At the invitation of a noble in glistening cuirass and helmet, the party from Himyra entered the cars and drove toward the palace through the streets paved in broad, flat stones. Croft, however, insisted on driving the motor he had brought, and with him went Magur, the priest.

Tamhys would grant them audience that evening, it appeared.

Magur smiled. He beckoned the noble to his side. "Then will Jasor of Nodhur, who sits before me, visit first on Zud," he announced. "Say this to Tamhys, when you reach the palace with Lakkon of Aphur and Jadgor, Aphur's king."

The man saluted and withdrew without question. Once more Magur smiled. Croft started the engine and moved off in the wake of the gnuppas that he might not frighten them out of their wits. "Turn here," said Magur after a time. Inside ten minutes they stopped in front of the main approach to the mighty pyramid.

Magur told of what he had seen and of what he had heard. The High Priest eyed him when he finished. "Magur believes these things?" he inquired.

"Aye, as in Zitu I believe." Magur inclined his head.

"That these things are of Zitu, through Jasor of Nodhur's mind?"

"Aye, Zud, servant of Zitu, so I believe."

Zud turned his eyes from the priest to Croft and back. "First came he to you, at Himyra, from Abbu the brother at Scira," he recited Magur's words.

"Aye."

"As a servant of Zitu's undreamed designs to come."

"Zud speaks the words present in my mind."

"Before the audience my request to be present shall reach Tamhys," Zud decided. "And now, Jasor of Nodhur, how come you by the knowledge of things undreamed?"

Croft told him so much as he dared. "My body lies as dead. In truth my spirit leaves it. And, while absent, acquires the knowledge with which it returns."

"As a voice?" said Zud.

"Nay, as something shown to me, together with the manner in which it may be made."

Zud rose and lifted his hands. "Who may understand Zitu?" he intoned in a voice of amazement. Croft felt he was convinced.

Hence when he stood that night before the white-haired Tamhys, he felt a quiet assurance born of the belief that Magur and Zud, both present, were his friends, and they were the friends of his cause.

"JADGOR OF APHUR," Tamhys began. "I have now summoned you before me, since for some time I have had you beneath my eye. You have married your son to a princess of Milidhur, and within half a cycle you have betrothed your sister's child to Cathur, and Belzor of Nodhur and yourself are friends. Thus only Bithur seems not swayed in more or less degree by those wishes which are yours, and you wax strong in power. Why have you done these things?"

"Tamhys of Tamarizia," Jadgor replied; "these things I do not deny. Robur of Aphur wedded the Princess Gaya for love. Nodhur's interests are one with Aphur, since both possess the Na within their lines. Naia has plighted her troth to Kyphallos of Aphur at my wish to make strong the guard of the western gate and assure to Tamarizia those things she holds." He spoke boldly and faced the emperor of his nation with an unflinching eye.

But Tamhys frowned. "This is not all," he said. "It has come to my ear that you have in Himyra a man—Jasor of Nodhur—who stands now before me—a man who works new marvels undreamed of before—that some of them are weapons, designed for the work of war—that Aphur and Nodhur and Milidhur increase the men in their guards to an unwarranted degree. What say you to this?"

"That you have heard the truth, O Tamhys," Jadgor again replied. "These things have been made. The guards have been increased. These things also have I done to make Tamarizia strong."

The lines of Tamhys's countenance contracted further. His features grew dark and he clenched a hand. "You are a man of power, Jadgor of Aphur," he cried. "Power is beneath your nostrils. Hence you dream of war. Yet is war not

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of my creed, nor shall be. For fifty cycles has Tamarizia known peace—"

"Aye—and fifty cycles past lost she the State of Mazhur, because she knew not the art of war—as she knows it now," Jadgor flared into interruption. Strong man that he was and crafty, he knew not the diplomatic speech. "Is she to lose Cathur now as well?" he rushed on and paused.

Tamhys smiled as one might at a child. "Jadgor of Aphur, the warning I have received concerning your aims comes to me from the loyal house of Cathur itself. Cathur thinks your eyes turn toward the throne. To me that is of little consequence. Yet you hesitate to see one mount the throne of Zitra to plunge our nation in war. You think, perhaps, to win Mazhur back."

"And if I should—should I make Tamarizia whole again!" Jadgor's voice rose with a fervid fire of patriotic feeling.

As for Croft, he felt assured he understood the situation better now. Cathur's spies had carried word of what was forward as he had felt assured they would. Cathur of Zollaria's prompting thus sought through the peace-loving Tamhys to tie the hands of Tamarizia while she made ready for the blow she expected to strike ere long. He said as much to Magur, who repeated it to Zud.

Tamhys smiled again. "Should you attempt it, you would send our sons to death for a little ground. Let be, Jadgor. Hold we not the western gate as always? Are the wails of dying men and the sobs of women things grown sweet to your ears?"

"Nay; but if Cathur falls—if Zollaria makes war and we canot defend what yet remains of our ground?" Jadgor's voice shook as he saw the end of his dream of strength in view.

"Would Zollaria have waited fifty years to make war had she it in mind?" Tamhys asked.

"Then what does Tamhys wish?" Jadgor inquired, with a sigh. He was no traitor, and under the law he must heed the emperor's word.

"That you cease those unwise undertakings—that you send the men from the shops of their making back to their fathers' trades; that you cease to dream of war and pursue the ways of peace in which we have prospered in the past. That you turn Jasor of Nodhur's mind to other things than the making of the instruments of destruction. I have heard he has builded chariots which run seemingly of themselves, and galleys which propel themselves up rivers and across the seas. Those things are well. Jadgor, I command that you forsake—"

"Hold, Tamhys!" It was Zud, the High Priest, who spoke. "Truth you have been told, yet not all the truth as it appears. None know the plans of Zitu save Zitu himself. A priest, I am as yourself, a man of peace. Yet Zitu himself may send a war at times to, like a sorrow, purge the soul of the nation and recall it to him, even as a grief may turn the soul of a man to higher things. Jasor of Nodhur was a dullard till Zitu opened his mind. He died as his physician declares, yet now he lives again, and speaks with a mind inspired.

"Himself he says these things are delivered unto him while his body lies as dead. This I have from Magur of Himyra who has seen him in such a sleep, and Magur has the account of his changing from Abbu of Scira who administered to him the last rites of life, ere he seemingly died. Hence Zitu's hand appears in this to the minds of Magur and myself. Shall Tamhys seek to interfere when Zitu directs?"

FOR the first time the emperor wavered in his course. Man of peace and believer in the State religion, the priest's words had a powerful effect upon his mind.

"If he comes as an agent of Zitu, why came he not first to Zitra?" he questioned at length.

Zud smiled. "Zitu acts many times through the means at hand. It were easier to convince the mind of Jadgor perhaps than to persuade Tamhys," he replied.

The emperor winced, and turned to Jadgor again. "Swear to me by Zitu that your acts were meant for Tamarizia's welfare and for no advancement of self through an increase of your power," he required.

Jadgor's face set into lines of a swift resentment. His color mounted, but he controlled his voice. "I swear it, O Tamhys," he said.

"These weapons are for Tamarizia's defense alone?"

"As Zitu sees my heart."

Tamhys chose a middle course. "Keep, then, what you have," he decreed; "yet fashion not any more. Nor urge your men to look for war, when peace is in their land. I have heard of strange writings posted on walls, inviting men to join your guards."

Jadgor's face was dark, but he bowed in submission to the emperor's command.

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"What of the men who stand pledged at present?" he asked. "I have promised them a stated wage for a cycle. It is understood. My word has passed."

"At the end of the cycle, let them be dismissed," said Tamhys after some thought.

Again Jadgor bowed.

Yet Croft found himself not unduly cast down, and he thought he caught a smile in Lakkon's eyes. Suspecting some such event as had just transpired, he had instructed Robur to speed the assembling of all rifles both at Himyra and at Landhra, before leaving for Zitra himself.

Tamhys's decision regarding such weapons as already existed he determined to accept in its broadest sense of application, and as for the dismissal of the guards now in process of training at the end of a cycle, he knew full well that they would probably not be needed after that time, or so hotly engaged that even Tamhys would rescind his decree.

Hence he felt that things had not turned out so badly as they might, and he fancied Lakkon's view of the matter was practically the same. In fact, his feeling was now as all along—a wonder that Tamhys had not interfered before as he had oftentimes feared he would. That he understood better now, having seen the man. He was old—wedded to a theory, rather than of practical type. His very begging of the issue as shown by his final ruling showed this.

He carried his desire for peace even into this conference to which he had called the men before him, and reached —a useless compromise which while nominally affecting the end at which he aimed, yet literally made small difference to Croft's plans, and, as he suddenly saw, would, when reported to Cathur and by Cathur given to other ears, result in no more than a determination on Zollaria's part to carry out her intent. This since she would now in all likelihood believe she had tied Jadgor's hands by stopping the manufacture of the weapon Croft had devised.

He said as much to Jadgor and Lakkon once they were alone, and for the first time Jadgor appeared pleased.

"Nor," said Croft, "has Tamhys forbidden the construction of *other* weapons, my friends."

"Hai!" Jadgor's tight lips relaxed. He gave Lakkon a glance. "By Zitu! So he did not. Jasor—you have other things in mind."

Croft nodded. It had occurred to him that, with powder and plenty of metal, it would not be impossible to construct some very effective forms of grenades. He explained, and Jadgor's eyes flashed fire.

CHAPTER XXI

MUCH MISCHIEF AFOOT

THE morrow saw them on their return journey to Himyra, with Croft pushing his engine top speed. He wanted to get back and to work on the grenades at once, for two reasons. First, that they would offset in part at least the embargo against the manufacture of more rifles, and because it occurred to him that they would be of vast service should he have to force entrance to some enemy town.

For now Croft was planning his campaign. His knowledge gained through his unsensed presence at the council at Niera months before made him believe that Zollaria would throw her entire weight on Cathur's northern frontier, while Mazzeria attacked Bithur and possibly eastern Milidhur.

From a second motor-shop established at Ladhra and equipped with men trained in the Himyra plant he had already sent a motor-fleet to the capital of Gaya's home state for the rapid transport of troops to the frontier in case of need. He had organized a fleet of motor-driven marine transports to take men from Aphur and Nodhur to Bithur's aid. This expedition was to be led by Robur in person, and with him Croft had outlined each step so far as he could. They would proceed up that river promised Mazzeria for her aid in the war of conquest Zollaria planned, and debarking near the frontier, carry the war straight to the foe.

As for himself, he planned with Jadgor to cross the Central Sea almost due north, capture Niera, and penetrate the State of Mazhur, thereby establishing a dangerous flank movement which, if successful, would result in withdrawing the Zollarian army operating against Cathur's frontier. Two of his armored motors would go with the Milidhurian expedition and two with Robur against the blue men of Mazzer. The other sixteen would accompany the expedition north. These things he now explained to Jadgor, Lakkon, and Magur while they rushed back to the capital of Aphur. They heard him and nodded agreement.

Jadgor smiled and turned to the priest. "It appears Zitu has sent us a general as well as a genius of design," he ex-

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claimed. "If Zitu inspires not his mind directly, then is he the most wonderful man Tamarizia has seen."

"Raised up for Tamarizia's hour of great need, O Jadgor," Magur declared. "And who should raise him save Zitu, who knows the future as we know the present and past? Zud says as much, and I believe it. Praised be Zitu's name." He made the odd horizontal sign of the cross Croft had first seen Abbu of Scira use.

"Nay, I doubt it not," Jadgor replied. "Tamhys shall yet live to learn the truth of this!"

Yet Croft, despite the religious superstitions of these truly patriotic minds, was human after all. He plunged into a frenzy of work on his return. He explained all to Robur, saw him thoroughly versed in the making of the grenades, leaped into his car and drove to Ladhra to begin operations there. Two weeks elapsed while he was getting everything to his satisfaction, and during those two weeks other things happened, which he could not foresee.

He returned to Himyra late one afternoon, drove to the shops, saw everything running smoothly, listened to the reports of Robur, who was enthusiastic over the progress being made, and drove on to the palace to bathe and rest for an hour, since even the splendid physique of Jasor's body was beginning to feel the strain of the months of scheming and toiling.

Fresh from his bath, he was suddenly minded to seek Gaya and learn if there were any word from Naia, such as she frequently sent him by Robur's wife.

He found her awaiting Robur's return, and proffered his request.

That Gaya was glad to see him there could be no doubt. His coming seemed to afford her relief. "My lord, your coming lightens my heart," she declared after Croft had greeted her by sinking on one knee. "The maid sent you her farewell, and asked that I say this much more: 'Tell him to forget not his promise.' She did not explain, yet I have felt you would know the meaning of her words."

"Her farewell? You say she sent me that?" exclaimed Croft, staring into her face. "By Zitu, Gaya, my friend, what meant she by that?"

"You know not of her absence from Aphur?" Gaya widened her eyes in surprise. "You have not heard?"

"I have heard nothing. I came to you for word," Croft began, and paused with an odd grip taking hold of his heart.

"Aye," Gaya wrinkled her brows. "Some days ago an escort came from Cathur, asking that the maid and Lakkon, her father, visit Scira, in order that Kyphallos might present his bride-to-be to his people before he ascended the throne."

"Kyphallos on the throne of Cathur!" Croft frowned. "Has Scythys, then, laid down the scepter in favor of his son?"

"Scythys has died," Gaya said. "Wherefore, despite the fact that the cycle of betrothal has not run out, Kyphallos craves the privilege of entertaining Naia and her father, and assuring his people that he has chosen a worthy queen as his consort on the throne."

"And — and she — and they — have gone?" Croft stammered as he spoke.

"Aye." Gaya looked into his eyes. "Jasor, what of it? I—I am a woman, and I have thoughts—fears, perhaps, or fancies. I like this journey not. What does it portend?"

"That I know not; yet shall I ascertain," Croft replied between set teeth. "She told me to forget not my promise. By Zitu and Azil and Ga, I shall not. Gaya, my sweet woman, how long have they been gone?"

"This is the third day since they departed, my lord."

"They went—how?"

"In the ship which brought the escort —one Kyphallos sent."

"The day after tomorrow they arrive. So then there is time."

CROFT relaxed somewhat the physical tension which had held him, and his voice grew less sharp. He sighed.

"Time? Time for what, Jasor?" Gaya inquired.

"Tonight I shall sleep," Croft told her frankly. "And while I sleep I shall learn what is the true intent of this sudden desire on Kyphallos's part to show Cathur their queen."

Gaya's eyes grew wide. "You shall sleep—as you sleep to learn?" she faltered.

"Yes," Croft smiled. "And I shall learn, wife of my friend. Zitu made Naia of Aphur a maid to madden men's blood, not for Cathur, but for Jasor. Yes, I shall learn."

But despite his confident tone he was more than a little disturbed as he sought his own rooms that night and stretched himself on his couch. What intent lurked in the mind of Cathur's prince he could not see. Nor could he understand why, knowing what already he had told them, Jadgor and Lakkon had decided to ac-

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cede to the Cathurian's request, unless they had followed the other man's course at the time of the bethrothal and acted in order to blind suspicion of their counter preparations so far as they might, or at least to avoid an open rupture at this time.

Hence it appeared doubly important that he should learn what was toward in Cathur now. He focused his mind. His body relaxed. He projected his intelligent ego toward Scira to discover what it might.

At first he went to the cell of Abbu in the Scira pyramid to learn, if he might, what Abbu was about.

He found him speaking with a brother priest—was half-minded to leave, yet lingered, held by the first remark of the unknown monk

"A nice time for Kyphallos to be at Niera, with his promised queen approaching Scira on the sea."

"He will return in time to greet her," Abbu said.

"Yet I like not his frequent journeyings to Niera, nor his association with the Zollarian nobles who make it their resort. Nor does Cathur like it overly well."

Abbu frowned. "Nor does Cathur like the stories which come back from Anthra concerning the things which occur there in the palace. Adito, they tell me, is more worshiped than Zitu. Ga, the true woman, or Azil, her son, have small consideration. 'Tis Adito, woman of folly and beauty, whose shrine is there."

"I have heard said that, while a creature of beauty, this Aphurian princess is not given to folly," his lay brother replied. "Mayhap she shall win Kyphallos from his present course, and so prove a blessing to Cathur in cycles to come."

"If so be she mounts the throne at all."

"You think she will not?"

Abbu shrugged. "Who knows? Cathur mutters even now, as you know. Scythys was a dotard. Kyphallos is a degenerate. Cathur is the worst-governed state in all Tamarizia—the most beset with taxes, with the least returns to show. But—Cathur is loyal to Tamarizia as a people. Think you they will long brook a king who makes merry with Zollarian nobles, while affairs of state go to pot?"

"Come!" cried the other. "You have heard something, Abbu, it would seem."

Abbu nodded. "Perhaps I keep my eyes and ears about me when I leave the pyramid."

Croft left. At least, he thought, Abbu was attending to his duties as Aphur's spy in so far as he might. And Cathur was muttering against their soon-to-be king. Cathur, then, was loyal—what if Kyphallos found her betrayal less easy than he expected? He smiled and willed himself to Niera, since now it appeared the Cathurian profligate was once more there. And if there, Croft thought he knew where to find him. He would be, almost without doubt, in the presence of Kalamita of the tawny eyes and hair.

And it was with her and her brother and Bzad, the Mazzerian chief, he found him, in a room of that palace overlooking the Central Sea. They sat together in a low-toned conversation. Evidently something important was forward, since they had closeted themselves thus, thought Croft.

KALAMITA stretched her supple length like a cat about to yawn, and turned a slow smile on the Cathurian prince.

"So then," she said, "it is all thought out. You men, with your spears and swords, are far stronger than subtle, my lords. Leave the subtlety to a woman in your plans."

"I see no chance of failure in this, I confess," Bzad spoke as she paused. Croft noted a flash in his eyes.

"Not unless you bungle." Kalamita laughed.

"I?" Bzad growled. "By Adita, goddess of beautiful women, I shall make no mistake. See, I shall repeat it step by step. On the fourth day after the princess arrives, Kyphallos of Cathur invites her and her father to visit Anthra, and they take the ship the next day. Meanwhile I place my galley under the cover of Anthra and wait. At the same hour they set sail I slip forth. Midway we meet and I sail close in passing. A collision seeming imminent, in the confusion a wrong order is given on board Kyphallos's galley. The prow of my galley strikes his ship as it seeks to cross my bows through turning in the wrong direction. Kyphallos and the maid are saved. Lakkon drowns, and any surviving sailors on board the Cathurian ship are destroyed, so that none shall survive to tell what happened really.

"I sail to Scira and put Kyphallos ashore. We tell a story of disaster in which all perished save only him. According to it, this Naia died with her father. I sail away. She is mine—and once in Mazzeria, think you I shall not enjoy her beauty By Adita, I think I shall!"

Kalamita nodded. "You have it, Bzad," she declared, "and soon you shall have

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—her—to do with—as you please. They tell me she is very fair indeed. She should bring you joy for some time."

A blind rage—a fiery disgust and loathing filled Croft's soul as he heard the wanton's words. This was the fate her soiled brain had evolved for the pure, sweet jewel of womanhood for whom his spirit cried. Yet since in his present state there was no chance for expression of those things he felt, he controlled his horror at the thought of Naia as the plaything of this cold-faced blue savage, and learned all he could.

"Thereafter," Bandhor spoke for the first time, with a thin-lipped leer, "our good lord Kyphallos shall come to Anthra, after a period of mourning, and invite our sister to visit him for a time. But upon her desiring to leave he shall refuse. A man of her ship's crew shall escape Anthra in a boat and bring tidings, whereupon him to whom she is pledged shall lay the affair before the emperor himself. Our army shall be ready. An expedition shall proceed to Anthra to rescue Kalamita. In the meantime Kyphallos shall have taken her to Cathur, and have concealed her—placing her in the sanctuary of Ga, where the vestals will have her in charge. Then shall Zollaria attack, and Mazzer. Tamarizia, finding herself assailed on all sides, shall break like the crushed-in shell of an egg!" He contracted the fingers of a mighty hand until they were flexed in his palm. "Thus it shall be."

Thus it shall be. Would it? Man proposes but God disposes, Croft thought to himself. Nai of Aphur the toy to a man of blue—a member of the servants' caste nation—Cathur to Zollaria. Tamarizia crushed. Kyphallos and his light o' love on the throne of Zitra where now the pacific old Tamhys sat. A pretty plan. Bzad and Bandhor, Kyphallos and Kalamita, in her scented and voluptuous beauty, seemed very sure it was coming about in time. To Croft, as he left them at their scheming and flitted back to his room in Aphur's palace, it seemed somewhat less likely to occur.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE HABIT OF ZITU

ONCE in the flesh again, conscious of all he had seen and heard, he sprang from his couch and dressed. He was going in the flesh to Scira. That one thing was clear in his mind. He would go to the capital of Cathur as quickly as his swiftest motor-galley might take him, and get into touch with Abbu and through him with Naia. After that, things must be met as they arose, only there was another thing on which he was equally determined: the girl should never embark for Anthra on the Prince of Cathur's craft.

Leaving the palace, he entered his car, kept in the court now always for any emergency, and drove straight to the dock on the Na, where the fleet of motor craft were kept busy. Here he selected a galley—one of the latest models he had prepared; sent runners to rout out the crew and order them aboard, ready to sail at once.

From the dock he drove to the shops, flaring with light as the night-shift worked; called one of his most expert motor builders to one side, and directed him to report aboard the galley as quickly as he might. To him he gave authority to open a warehouse and provision the boat for a voyage of some days, and instructions to bring it to the quay below the palace so soon as ready to sail.

Then he went back to the palace itself, and sent a nodding guard to rouse Robur and ask him to come to Croft's rooms. He waited there in a vast impatience until the door opened to admit Aphur's crown prince.

That Robur was keyed to some expectancy he saw at a glance. The man's eyes were wide, his whole expression eager. Croft suspected Gaya had whispered wifely confidences into his ear earlier that night. He plunged into his theme at once:

"Rob—I've slept—one of my certain sleeps. Gaya told you, I suppose."

Robur nodded. "Yes. And you have learned, Jasor—what?"

Croft told him, and Robur swore a strong Aphurian oath. "They plan that, do they? Naia to Bzad, a man of Mazzer. By Zitu, Jasor, I am with you in whatever you mean to do."

Croft shook his head. "Nay, Rob, my friend. Your duty is to Tamarizia first. You know all we have planned. Your place is here—to general the Bithurian expedition when it is time. Mine is the duty to the maid."

"You love her." Robur made the statement direct.

"Aye." Croft met it and looked him in the eye.

Robur put forth a hand. "Azil be kind to you and her," he made answer. "What have you planned?"

Croft explained his intent in a very few words. "I await now the lights of the galley at the quay below," he finished.

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"I desire to slip forth unknown to any save the guards. Will you drive me down with what arms I shall take?"

"Aye," said Aphur's heir. "You can reach Scira how soon?"

"In two days—the day after Naia and Lakkon arrive."

Robur smiled thinly. "Should you save Lakkon's life as well as his daughter's a second time, his gratitude should overcome much."

Croft shook his head. "I plan not on gratitude, Rob. I myself shall overcome much—Kyphallos, Zollaria, and Mazzer. So shall I reach to the woman Zitu formed for me. I shall enter Scira at night, and go to the pyramid, and—Hold! Drive now with me to Magur. He must lend me a priestly robe."

"Come!" Robur's eyes flashed. Once more he smiled. "A priest shall reach Scira, my friend? He shall go to the pyramid. I understand."

The two men left the palace, entered the car, and crossed the bridge, swung into position on Robur's order. They stopped before the pyramid and hammered on the door. A sleepy priest admitted them at last-and sent them up on the primitive lift to Magur's lofty apartments. Magur himself appeared in the end, blinking sleepily with startled eyes when he faced Croft and Robur himself.

Croft explained.

Magur balked. "Shall the garments of Zitu be used for deception?" he exclaimed.

"Shall not the garments of Zitu serve to guard a clean shrine of life from pollution?" Croft snapped in return. "Can the cloth of the Source of all Life be put to a better end?"

Magur gave him a glance little short of admiration. "Ye speak, as always, with the words of Zitu himself," he returned. "I am convinced. Wait, and this matter shall be arranged." He turned away. In five minutes he was back with a dark-brown robe and hood, not unlike a cowl, also a pair of leather sandals and a cord with which to belt the robe about the waist. These he placed in Croft's hands, and raised his own. "Zitu go with ye, my son," he spoke in a formal blessing. "Should he favor ye on this mission, what shall ye do with the maid? Her return to Himyra would cause a clacking of tongues."

"I have thought of that, O Magur," Croft replied. "The maid shall go to Zitra so quickly as she may. There Zud himself shall see her in sanctuary in the quarters of the virgins, until this thing has passed, unless you have better to suggest. Thus it is Zollaria plans to hide their unclean Kalamita in Scira. I am minded to turn their own trick upon themselves."

"Nay," Magur smiled. "Thy plan is worthy of one of your mind. Go, then, and may Ga, the pure mother, use you to guard the maid."

The galley lights glared red in the night at the quay as Croft and Robur drove back across the bridge which opened behind them span by span. All was ready now save the arms and ammunition. Working in haste at the palace, the prince and Croft collected those and took them down to the ship.

"You shall win, my friend," said Robur as he clasped hands with Croft at parting.

Croft smiled somewhat grimly. "I shall win, Rob," he returned, "or you need not look for me back."

Then he was off, dropping down the Na, passing the high-reared barrier of the walls, and once past those, opening the motor and speeding down the mighty yellow flood to the sea.

A day passed, two days, and night came down. Far to the front the lights of Scira lifted above the waters. Croft called his crew and gave them their instructions in detail. They were to stay by the ship, were to be ready to start at once. Then, to their amaze, he slipped on the priest's robe over his cuirass and sword, and appeared before them thus as they approached the harbor gates. The standard of Aphur broke out at the galley's stern. They passed inside unchallenged and moored at the quay. To the harbor master—a huge Cathurian captain—Croft said merely that he was a priest come on a mission from Magur to the pyramid, and stepped ashore.

And knowing Scira as he did, he set off in the right direction without delay, arrived in due time and without incident at the pyramid portals and rapped for admission, asking for Abbu as soon as he was inside. Then—he was in Abbu's cell, fumbling with his robe and casting it from him, to stand in gold and silver harness before the monk's staring eyes.

"My lord—my lord!" faltered the priest.

"Hold." Croft lifted his hand. "Strange things are forward in Scira. What know you of them, Abbu, who have acted as Aphur's eyes?"

"Yesterday the prince returned from Niera to greet the Aphurian maid he is to wed," Abbu replied. "It was a holiday occasion. The streets swarmed with people."

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"THINK you Kyphallos intends to lead Naia to the throne?" Croft snapped.

"Zitu!" Abbu lifted his hands in the sign of the cross. "Is it not so pledged, Jasor?"

"Aye—by the lips, yet not by the heart," said Croft. Swiftly he told the staring monk those things he had learned.

"Zitu would not permit this," Abbu mumbled at the last.

"Nay. Hence am I here. Listen, Abbu the priest. What I do, I do by the grace of Zitu—and with His consent. I am come to overthrow this most foul plot. You who have sworn to help me in Zitu's name must gain access to this maid. Say to her what is to be. Say to her thus when you have told her all else as a sign: 'Jasor has not forgotten.' Hearing this, she will believe. Say to her then that on the night after you have spoken to her she shall desire to speak with a priest from the holy pyramid, to receive a blessing before she is presented to Cathur's people. She shall prefer her request of Kyphallos himself, and insist that it be granted.

"She shall specify the priest Abbu, whom she knows. I shall then go to her in the palace. Instruct her that her father shall be with her when I arrive. Thereafter shall we contrive a way out of the palace and to the boat I hold waiting for her escape. Say not to her that I shall come in your place. That she will learn when I appear. Now give me a place to sleep, and when you see her state these facts concerning Kyphallos's plan as things of your own knowledge, confessing to her that you have acted as Aphur's eyes for well nigh a whole cycle past."

Abbu bowed. "Indeed," he said, "I believe you speak truth, O Jasor, and with Zitu's help I shall do all you say. Take my pallet for your slumber. I shall pray through the night for your success to Zitu himself."

Throughout the next day Croft lay hid. Abbu brought him food in the morning and disappeared. He was not disturbed during the day. What Abbu was about he could not know. Only late in the day when the monk returned was he to learn how he had managed his task.

"My lord, there was a pageant in honor of her, of Aphur and her father," he explained. "The civic guard and that of the palace marched before them, while the people watched, and you know that it is a custom for the lay brothers of the pyramid to solicit alms. So with my little earthen jar I passed among the people, and after a time I approached the raised station where Aphur's princess sat, and lifting my little jar I cried to her as Cathur's queen-to-be that she give freely to Cathur's temple. This I did for a purpose which fell out as I desired. A guard about the noble party angrily bade me be off.

"I lifted my voice in protest, crying again to that beautiful woman for alms. She heard me, my lord. She has a gentle heart. 'Hold,' said she to the guard. 'Let the priest approach.' Thus, my lord, I gained her side, and she gave me pieces of silver enough to fill my jar, compelling all her party to contribute freely.

"And when that had been done she asked me of our temple, and I told her concerning it, and called a blessing upon her, and contrived to whisper that I had an important message, meant for her ears alone.

"The maid, my lord, is quick of comprehension. She turned to the prince himself. 'This priest finds favor with me,' she said. 'I would speak with him further. It may be that I shall select him for my own spiritual instructor once I am Cathur's queen.'

"Kyphallos smiled, my lord. 'As you will, my princess,' he replied, and I think he suspected nothing.

"Then the maid turned back to me and set a time for me to come to her at the palace on the morrow in the morning. Is it well, my lord."

"It is well," said Croft, though the delay of another day did not please his impatience to know Naia safe. "Yet there is more for you to do. Provide me a second robe such as Magur gave me which I wore here, and arrange for a carriage to be waiting tomorrow night on the street from the palace to the harbor. Do this in time that I may know the driver's name, when I shall come upon him, and so calling him identify myself as the man for whom he is employed. Here—" He drew a pouch and placed silver in Abbu's hand. "Pay the man well, and tell him to look for as much beyond what you give him if he serves me without fail. Also provide me a standard of Cathur's colors, such as are used on ships."

The latter request was due to a sudden thought which had popped into Croft's mind, and evoked a tight-lipped smile. He had conceived a way to throw consternation into the camp of his foes. He set about planning it out that same night and the succeeding day.

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CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN THE TABLES WERE TURNED

AND when night came down once more on Scira he was ready. Once he had ventured forth, gone to the harbor, in seeming a priest, and conferred with the captain of his ship, telling him to be prepared to sail on the word that night.

Back in the pyramid he waited Abbu's coming with what patience he could. The monk came about noon. "All things are ready, my lord, so far as time permits," he made his report.

"You saw the maid?"

"Aye."

"And what said she?"

"At first she was amazed, bewildered, I think, as was her father whom she summoned after I had told my tale, that I might relate it again to his ears. That was after I said to her the words you told me to repeat. Hearing them, she believed and called Prince Lakkon at once. His anger was great. He was for carrying the thing to Kyphallos himself and compelling him to admit or deny. But—both the maid and I prevailed upon him to see that by so doing he would destroy not only himself but her. In the end they agreed to summon me to the palace as soon as it fell dark."

"That is well," said Croft. "The rest is prepared."

"The driver and the standard, aye. I shall give you the robe before you depart."

"You shall live to receive your reward," said Croft. "Now we have naught to do save wait."

And waiting proved the hardest part as the day dragged past. Of the adventure of the evening he had no fear. In fact he chafed to be at it as a restive horse frets at restraint. Never had the hours of a single day seemed so long in their course. He marked mid afternoon, and watched the lowering sun. He welcomed evening and the creeping twilight. Dusk was a boon to give thanks for, and yet he raged because dusk having fallen, Naia did not send for Abbu the monk.

Yet in the end Abbu appeared before him and whispered that the time was come—that a chariot from the palace waited without the pyramid. He carried a tightly rolled package in his hands and gave it to Croft. "The robe, my lord," he declared. "Zitu aid you in its use."

"Zitu reward you, as I shall see you rewarded in a time to come," Croft told him, donning his own robe and thrusting the other beneath it. "Farewell for the present, Abbu. Your service is done."

Leaving the pyramid he entered the chariot sent to fetch him and rode swiftly to the palace. Once as he noted his driver he smiled as he imagined the man's consternation could he dream who his passenger was despite his priestly seeming and the final results of this drive. But he spoke no word while they threaded the streets or when the chariot pausing, he descended, passed inside the palace, and was led by a page to the Princess Naia's door.

That door he entered, and for the first time in months found himself in the presence of the woman he loved.

She rose and stood before him. "I have done as I promised my father, what more must I do?" he heard her sweet-toned voice.

"Aye, what more have you to tell us, Abbu, you could not tell us before?" asked Lakkon, rising from a couch placed farther back from the door.

Croft threw off his enveloping cowl and robe. He stood before them, his cuirass with the sun of Aphur shining on its metal breast, sending a sparkle of light through the room. "Not Abbu this time, Prince Lakkon," he said.

"Jasor!" Naia's eyes went wide. She started back a pace while her color faded swiftly, and she lifted her hand to her breast.

"Jasor of Nodhur, by Zitu!" Lakkon cried. "Come, my lord, what means this priestly disguise?"

"Life—for yourself—life and honor for your daughter, as I hope, since I know she would not live without the latter," Croft returned. "Hark you, Lakkon of Aphur. You are a man with a sword at your belt. Tell me is your daughter's serving-maid, Maia, of your party here?"

"Aye," Lakkon returned, visibly impressed by Croft's presence and bearing. "Yet—"

"Enough," Croft cut him short. "Here is an extra robe of a priest. Let the princess and Maia don them and pass out of the palace doors. You and I shall walk forth together. To any who seek to stay us, I am your friend. I wear Aphur's arms. Let them stop two nobles of Aphur at their peril. Without the palace, the princess and the maid will turn to the right and walk down the street toward the harbor which is by happy chance toward the Scira pyramid. We shall overtake them. We shall enter a carriage and drive to the harbor and leave this nest of treason. Abbu has told before this what is planned."

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"Aye—but—" Lakkon stammered.

"I shall prove his words true," Croft flashed. "Summon Maia quickly lest something intervenes."

"Father—do as my lord advises." Naia laid a hand on Lakkon's arm.

"By Zitu—I like it not, yet—if it be for your safety. Were it not—were it for myself alone—summon your maid." Jadgor's counselor yielded to her plea.

The thing was so simple, indeed, that it made Croft smile. Inside five minutes the two women were prepared. Naia's wealth of hair was lost beneath the cowl. Croft opened the door and they sallied forth.

"Be of good heart," he found means to whisper into Naia's ear. "You see I did not forget, O maid of gold."

His reward was a quiet smile and a deep glance out of her eyes. Then she was gone, a monk seeming, with Naia at her side. Croft felt sure of their escape. Priests were no unusual sight about the palaces of the Tamarizian states. He doubted they would be questioned, even though two went out where one had come in.

Hence he waited with the frowning Lakkon until some five minutes had passed. Then opening the door he strode forth and turned down toward the palace doors. Beside him Lakkon stalked in silence. "Talk to me—seem to converse for the sake of your daughter at least," Croft urged.

Lakkon complied. In seemingly friendly converse they progressed. They reached the portals giving on the entrance court and passed the guards the more easily, perhaps, since none there as yet suspected what Kyphallos really planned, and so were not on guard against any act of the father of Cathur's queen-to-be, or some Aphurian friend of his, who wore the sun of Aphur in silver shining on his breast.

Thus what might have proved difficult, proved easy. They left the court, overtook the women, led them to the carriage and drove swiftly to Croft's ship. There he paid and dismissed the driver and took his passengers aboard. Only when his sailors cast off the moorings did comment arise at his acts. Then a harbor guard appeared and questioned the proceeding. And by then Croft was once more a priest, while Maia had resumed her natural part. And the priest explained he must return to Himyra quickly. The guard saluted and withdrew with the monk's commendation of his attention to duty. The ship left the quay. It passed the harbor gates and floated free. Croft heaved a sigh of relief.

"ON the fifth day you and your daughter would have journeyed to Anthra," he turned to Lakkon to say. "Midway you would have been met by Bzad of Mazzer and your vessel rammed. Death for yourself and dishonor for your child would have swiftly followed. Lakkon of Aphur, I told you I would prove my words true, and I will. We shall meet this galley of the Mazzerian's midway to Anthra on the fifth day."

Lakkon beat the planks of the deck with his foot. "Jasor of Nodhur, you are a bold man," he said. "You seem to have faith in your words. Yet should you fail to prove them, I think I shall have your head."

"Then take mine with it, father," Naia who had approached unseen by either man burst forth. "Once before has Jasor saved our lives. Now saves he our lives and that which I prize higher still. You are hard to persuade, if you call him not son in the end."

"Ah—fall it so!" Lakkon turned upon her. "To your quarters, girl. Is it seemly for her who values honor so highly, to offer herself to a man?"

"To the one man, yes," she retorted, turning to go below. "Between him and her is no question of honor, nor of aught, save love. To that man she belongs, nor will yield to any other while Zitu gives her breath."

"Azil, Giver of Life, and Ga, the Virgin!" Lakkon swore.

"Peace!" Croft's hand fell on his arm. His heart was singing in his breast at Naia's words. "Hold, Lakkon. Let me prove my words true."

And now Croft carried out the change he had made in his plans. All the succeeding day he sailed in circles, drawing nearer and nearer to Anthra rather than to Zitra. He lay to at night, keeping no more than headway on the ship.

Just what Kyphallos might think when he found his affianced princess flown he did not know, but he smiled more than once as he fancied a pretty to-do in Scira, and a somewhat confused rage in the young reprobate's mind. For indeed as he saw it Kyphallos must sense himself in a rather precarious plight. His hostage to Bzad was gone. As yet there was no war. He might hardly send word to Aphur, that their princess and Lakkon were gone he knew not where. He must find it an embarrassing thing to explain the incident to Zollaria as well—a hard thing to make them swallow. A thing which might very well shake their confidence in himself.

Indeed, as Croft saw it, Kyphallos

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would put off the explanation so long as he might, hoping to find some trace of the Aphurians themselves and thereby obviate any necessity of explaining anything at all. Yes, Croft chuckled to himself, Kyphallos was in something of a fix. Probably, though, failing to find his escaped guests the first day, he would go in person to meet Bzad. That must be foreseen. Hence it were best for Croft to be ready with his arms. He got them out and saw them loaded—and since he had chosen a war galley for his trip north, he had men aboard he had already trained in their use. He distributed the weapons to a selected number and was ready for what might occur.

Lakkon saw the rifles in the hands of the men and questioned concerning it at once. Croft, nothing loath, explained the entire situation as he viewed it. "You have asked proof, and proof I intend to give you, Prince Lakkon," he declared.

Lakkon's face grew grave. "Indeed, I think you believe all you say, my lord," he replied. "What do you intend?"

"To meet Bzad close to Aphur," Croft explained. "To hang forth the standard of Cathur. To lure him close, and give you proof of what I have said from the man's own mouth."

For so he had planned and was bent on carrying out. The morning of the fifth day found him therefore close to Anthra—yet not too close.

Before its shores were more than a faint blur on the horizon the lookout reported a galley heading west.

Croft called Lakkon and bade him stand beside him on the deck. He directed the standard of Cathur hung from the stern and ordered the speed of the engines increased. The galley surged toward the meeting at top speed. And the other galley came on.

"She will sail very close," said Croft.

Lakkon frowned.

"At the last I am supposed to give a wrong order," Croft spoke again. "My helmsman knows his duty. We shall crush her near bank of oars."

THE two ships drew nearer still. Croft fancied Bzad would be surprised at their speed, but—Cathur's standard rippled in the breeze. He would think everything well.

Closer and closer. Croft raised his hand. Two sailors sprang to the rail in the waist. They carried grappling hooks attached to ropes. Closer still—

Croft dropped his hand. The bow of his galley veered.

Crash! The near bank of oars snapped like straws. The vessels ground together. The men in the waist cast their hooks and lashed all fast.

Bzad appeared on the after-deck. His face was dark, yet he seemed not yet to comprehend the full bearing of what had occurred. Lakkon was in full sight of the Cathurian galley, and Lakkon he knew was to be aboard. Kyphallos was not visible, but another man in armor was by Lakkon's side.

Bzad lifted his voice. "What means this?" he cried.

"There has been a change of plan," Croft returned.

"A change of plan!" the Mazzerian repeated. "Yes, a change of plan indeed it would seem, when you crash into my side and destroy my oars instead of crossing my bows as 'twas arranged. Still, small matter. I have others. Where is the maid?"

"Below," said Croft, sensing Lakkon stiffen at his side. "Do you wish her still?"

"Do I wish her? Adita, goddess of beauty, was she not promised me for myself as a part of the price?" Bzad roared.

Again Croft lifted an arm. Men appeared with rifles in their hands. "Then if so be you wish her, come and take her, aid of Zollaria and man of an unclean tribe. If you wish her, come and take her from a ship of Aphur, Bzad."

And now the Mazzerian understood at last. He started back and raised his voice: "Aboard them—strike, slay! We are betrayed. Let none live save the maid of the yellow hair!"

His men were no cowards. They rallied to his cry. Seizing weapons they hurled themselves toward the close lashed rails.

"Fire," said Croft, as an arrow whistled between himself and Lakkon.

His men responded with a will. This was the first trial of the new weapon in actual war. They fired and loaded and fired again. On board Bzad's vessel men fell. They slumped to the deck or toppled back from the rail which they had reached.

Bzad appeared among them. He was beside himself with rage. He sprang on the rail. A sailor fired pointblank in his face and missed him. He reached the deck and charged with drawn sword toward Lakkon and Croft.

With a strange tingle running through his entire body, Croft drew his own sword and set himself before Aphur's prince. And then, before they could come together, Bzad staggered and fell. The sailor had not missed his second shot.

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Bzad struggled for a moment. He forced himself halfway up and sank back. His limbs twitched oddly for a moment, and he died.

Beyond him the deck of his own craft was a shambles. Men lay on Croft's deck as well, some of them his, more of them Bzad's, of whom no more than six survived out of a possible score. Of Croft's none had been killed and the whole affair had taken no more than five minutes from beginning to end.

Croft's voice boomed forth. "Overboard with the dead. Bind the remaining men and take them with us. Board the galley and sink it. We shall leave no trace of this."

Then as his men sprang laughing to do his bidding he turned to where Lakkon stood by the body of Bzad. "Will you go below and reassure your daughter, Prince Lakkon?" he said.

"Come—we will go together," Jadgor's brother-in-law replied.

Croft complied. The two men went below. They entered the quarters where Naia sought to look from a tiny port, and Maia crouched in a corner as far from the opening as she might.

"Come, my child," said Aphur's prince; and as she advanced slowly toward himself and Croft, stretched out his hand for hers.

"Behold your lord," he went on and laid her hand in Croft's. "To him shall you be given by Magur himself, when this thing is ended. In the mean time shall you lie with the Virgins at Zitra, even as he has decreed."

Naia flushed. A soft color dyed her face and perfect throat. She lowered her eyes, and suddenly throwing all reticence aside, she lifted her arms and laid them about Croft's neck and raised her lips to his.

"Ah!" exclaimed Lakkon somewhat aghast. "Naught can keep you from her now with honor, Jasor of Nodhur—my son."

"Nothing shall keep me from her save death," Croft told him and held her very close.

And lying against him, Naia turned her head. Her eyes were glowing with the light of a sacred fire. But she laughed. "My father—you have called him son," she reminded. "Recall that I said you should."

"I ask no better privilege, my son and daughter," Lakkon yielded with a smile. "Zitu himself knows I liked not the other arrangement. He knows this pleases me well."

The captain tapped on the door. He reported the Mazzerian's galley sinking, and the decks as cleared.

Two minutes later, Croft's vessel was headed for Zitra south by east. Behind was an empty sea. If Kyphallos had started a galley to inform Bzad of what had occurred at Scira, it was apt to search long and vainly for him it was meant to meet.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DOGS OF WAR

WAR! War between Zollaria and Tamarizia! War planned for fifty years and now set into motion! It had come as Croft had predicted, as Jadgor of Aphur had feared. As though malignly determined to be avenged even in death, the bullet-pierced body of Bzad had washed ashore, and been discovered. No other pretext was needed by the Empire to the north.

All other plans they threw by the board. Bzad of Mazzer—a guest of their nation had been slain on the Central Sea. They made demands for redress, and they asked Cathur as the price of what had just occurred.

Tamhys of Zitra with a pained, almost puzzled expression in his aged eyes, heard the demands of the envoys and answered them finally not as a man of peace but as a patriot of his country, unwilling to see his land dismembered to appease an enemy's greed.

The Na was alive with motor-driven vessels, gathering at Himyra, filling its yellow flood with a ready fleet. Aboard them marched men or rolled armored motors, soon to have their test on a bloody field. Into them were loaded those things Croft had fashioned against this time, rifles and ammunition and grenades.

Ladhra and Himyra swarmed with marching men. Milidhur's two armored cars were rushing overland to join her assembling forces. Robur in his glory was loading his expedition for the relief of Bithur, where Mazzer was to strike. The gentle Gaya wept, while her war lord girded on his armor and boasted of the fate he would carry among the blue men with his death-dealing tools.

Naia of Aphur was with the Vestals of Zitra, where Croft had left her a month before. He had taken her to Zud, and explained what he desired. Zud had listened and given assent. Their parting had been brief since Croft knew he must hasten back to Himyra and begin the final preparations for what was soon to

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come. Zud knowing her pledged by Lakkon to Croft, had left them alone at the last, before he took her to the apartments of the Virgins, close to the top of the monster pyramid, where a white flame leaped from oils never allowed to diminish in front of a figure of Ga—the Eternal Woman—brooding over the sacred fire of life.

Croft stretched forth his arms.

Naia of Aphur gave him the look of the woman, and laid herself on his breast.

"Mine," said the man.

"Yours," said the maid, in a voice like the sighing of a harp. "Promise me you shall come again to claim me, Jasor, my lord, whom I love."

"I shall come to claim you, my Naia, and make you my own," he said.

"And should you not, no other shall claim me ever," she whispered and raised her lips.

"Naught save death shall keep me," Croft vowed with his lips on hers.

"I know. If you come not, I stay here forever," she told him, clinging to him.

"Nay." He held her from him to look down into her face. "You shall tend the fire for me, rather than Ga."

"Azil permitting, beloved." And because of the meaning of her own words to her soul she colored beneath his eyes.

Then came Zud and led her to the Vestals, and Croft, full of the divine fire of that parting, went back to Himyra to prepare for those things which must come to pass ere he might return to her.

He plunged into the task with the full cooperation of Jadgor, Lakkon, and Robur. A swift boat was sent to Zitra to wait any news at that point. Word was sent to Milidhur and Ladhra to mobilize their forces and be ready to move on the word. At Himyra activities of every nature were pushed. Never had the Red City seen such ceaseless preparation as now went on to meet and check Zollaria's plans.

Of those plans Croft kept track, leaving his body at times in the night and hovering over Cathur and the northern nation. He knew when the envoys left for Zitra to demand Cathur, of Tamhys, as the price of peace. He witnessed the massing of her army along Cathur's north frontier. He saw Kyphallos at the head of the hastily gathered levies of Cathur, men untrained, unready, herded into hasty companies, poorly equipped—beings to be led to the slaughter in a sham of resistance as he knew, before Kyphallos did his part and surrendered to what would seem overwhelming forces equipped and trained for this moment through a span of fifty years.

Yet Croft smiled. In all that vast army set aside for this one task by the empire which had raised it, there was nothing to compare with the weapons he possessed, naught to resemble them in the least. Spears there were and bows, crossbows even, and swords. Chariots there were, and men in glistening armor, who drove them. Scythelike blades armed their wheels to cut and rend asunder all who stood in their course. But what were they to his chariots which would move themselves across the field of carnage and vomit the fire of death into Zollaria's ranks?

THEN came the swift boat from Zitra, reporting Tamhys's answer and the return of the envoys north. Tamhys had refused. Croft laughed into Jadgor's eyes. Tamhys had asked—*asked* that Aphur and Nodhur and Milidhur use their full power and their new weapons to make Tamarizia strong.

"Think you he would have been so bold had he not known of them?" Jadgor growled, with a teeth-baring grin. "Nay by Zitu! If so I do not agree. 'Twas because he knew these things were in our hands, and Tamarizia in our hearts he refused.

"Go!" he cried to the messenger who had but returned. "Say to Tamhys that we stand ready—that we say at once—that ere Zollaria's men shall return with his word, we shall be nearing the northern coast! How say you, Jasor, my lord?"

"Even as Jadgor has said, O King," Croft replied, since this was what he had planned.

That night all Himyra flared with fire. That night the sound of marching feet, the rumble of motors filled the Red City's streets. The firelight struck on the motors' metal bodies, glinted on the slanting barrels of the rifles carried by Aphur's sons. A swift car had flown to Ladhra carrying the word. In Ladhra, too, the night was filled with embarkation of the forces which were to join with Aphur in the north.

At break of day Croft, Jadgor and Lakkon sailed. That afternoon Ladhra's first contingent arrived. Then Robur sent part on the heels of the former fleet, and took part in his own party, to Bithur's aid. Belzor himself led the section which hurried after Croft. He reported the motor transports as already whirling the bulk of the troops for Milidhur's aid toward the east.

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In three days Croft made landfall on the coast of Mazhur not far from Niera and coasted toward the town, after landing a party under Lakkon some miles above it with instructions to advance down the coast, and entrench themselves on the landward side of the city, at once. He appeared before the city with his fleet about mid-morning and demanded its surrender at once.

His answer was defiance, of course.

Croft set to work. His own galley ran close in toward the gates of the harbor. The enemy manned the walls. They began a rain of arrows and spears and the casting down of fireballs, hoping to set the galley on fire.

Croft had expected this. He had prepared some metal shields which could be used to cover the decks against arrows and spears from above. They were impregnable save for some square-cut holes. Through these he began a bombardment of the gates themselves with grenades. Heavy as they were, they had not been built to resist the assault of powder. Inside twenty minutes, while the air filled with shouts and missiles of the defenders, one was blown from its hinges and fell with a mighty splash. The other followed shortly after. Croft's galley sailed in, followed by that of Jadgor and several others of the fleet.

And now he had the defenders of the walls in the rear. His galley paused. The others followed suit. Their decks swarmed with men who knelt and opened fire from the rifles Croft had made. A smell of powder filled the air. Smoke clouds floated in the air. The shouts of the defenders changed to cries of alarm as they found themselves stricken by this new and unknown force. Other galleys forced passage and speeding beyond the engaged vessels opened a galling fire along the waterfront. Under cover of this landing parties were flung ashore. They marched into the town, engaging the Zollarian guards wherever found, yet always at an advantage of weapons and range. In an hour it was done.

The Zollarian commander surrendered. Croft shut his men in their barracks and posted a guard. Bulletins printed in advance, promising freedom from harm to all non-combatants who kept their houses and caused no trouble, were affixed at the houses at the corners of the streets. The remainder of the fleet entered the harbor and debarked their men and the armored motors. Inside two hours more Croft marched out of the landward gate and joined Lakkon and his men where they had labored on their trenches. That night Jadgor's tent stood in the midst of an armed camp on Mazhurian soil. Tamarizia had struck swiftly and with an overwhelming force, for which Zollaria had been unprepared.

THE next day the men of Ladhra arrived. Croft left them to garrison Niera until a later body from the interior parts of Aphur should arrive, then follow on. In fact he left orders that as each new contingent appeared they should take over Niera, releasing the garrison they found to advance through the state in support of his main force. Himself he broke camp and moved inland along the splendid roads which Tamarizia had built generations unnumbered before, when Mazhur was one of her states.

For Palos, the sight was odd as the well-drilled ranks moved ahead in steady cadence, with here and there a huge ungainly battle motor rumbling along, its monster body filled with men. Here and there in some minor town some slight resistance was met. The motors took care of that. Rolling irresistibly forward into a slithering flight of arrows and spears, they spat fire at the defenders until they fell or fled.

On and on crept the column with scarcely a pause save for rest or food. That word of it went before it Croft did not doubt. He even smiled grimly as he suggested to Jadgor what that word would be—a garbled version of monsters which breathed fire and slew with their breath, of troops which shot not arrows but more of the monsters' fire.

And Jadgor smiled in return as he gazed down the sturdily swinging ranks that crept along the road the lumbering motors had cleared.

Luckily there were few streams, for the Zollarians seemed to understand dimly by what they were attacked. They destroyed what bridges lay in the line of their retreat. Some of them had to be repaired, thereby losing time. Thus, as he advanced, Croft found the countryside cleared and sensed that the retreating forces were trusting to the main body, when they reached it, to check his victorious course.

He had some swift motors in which he himself and Jadgor and Lakkon rode. Taking one of these, he sent it far ahead to feel out the road. In it he placed a picked squad of his very best marksmen and ordered them to return at all costs should they contact the enemy in force.

But the enemy in force was attacking

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the frontier of Cathur. That was as Croft had planned it. That was Zollaria's second mistake, even as her first was in not knowing the full weight of the power she faced.

Thus days passed and the Tamarizian army had actually reached the northern bounds of Mazhur itself, as Jadgor declared, before any news of the main enemy body was received.

Then the scout-motor came back and reported heavy forces hurrying to intercept their present line of march.

Croft ordered a halt and took stock of the situation. Before him was a defile in the hills, through which ran the road to reach a farther plain. And that was enough. He ordered an advance. Deploying his army right and left, he set them to digging trenches along the hillside so as to enfilade the plain from both sides of the central pass. In these he posted the riflemen and one of his trained grenade corps every fifty feet.

Across the road he built a barricade, some way back on the frontline trench. High on each side of the pass he posted other riflemen behind shelters of stone in such a position that they could fire into the road or cast down grenades. In front of the barricade itself he parked his battle-motors, unseen from the plain, but ready to emerge upon it when the time should come.

He was hard at it in the midst of these arrangements when a band of Zollarians mounted on gnuppas appeared above a gentle swell in the road, perhaps a mile away, sat watching the work along the hillside for some moments, turned and disappeared in the direction from whence they had come.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN HELMOR'S SUN SET

"THEY come, O Jadgor of Aphur!" Lakkon said.

"Let them," Croft flung out from a wonderful confidence. "You shall see their slaughter, O king."

The hosts of Zollaria appeared. From the top of the hill above the road Croft and the other two watched. Foot and chariots, the men of the northern nation began to top the rolling hill before them. It was mid-afternoon. The sunlight sparkled upon spear point and chariot, on cuirass and plume-tufted helm.

It was a wonderful sight as the soldiers of the empire prepared to hurl themselves against the smaller force which held the pass and the hills to either side. They deployed right and left, spearmen, bowmen, with a chariot filled with some noble and his driver here and there along the far-flung front. And, having deployed, they began a slow advance, moving like a mighty living ocean toward the shoreline of the hills. Prisoners were to tell Croft later they were sorely puzzled by the scant sight of the enemy they obtained.

The trenches, wherein lurked the waiting death they faced, baffled their understanding, were new in their knowledge of war. Their captains knew not exactly what they led them against. Yet they were proud in their might and the training of fifty years for this moment.

Men had lived and been trained and had died and handed down the tradition of this day to their sons who were being trained to take their father's places in the ranks when the day should come. Now they advanced without hesitation to write the history of the day itself upon their nation's page.

Croft turned to Jadgor and Lakkon. "You command the wings," he said. "I shall lead the motors. The next hour shall make us freemen or slaves. Say as much to your men." He began the descent of the hill, reached the motors, each with its load of tensely waiting soldiers, and entered his own—the first and leading car.

He gave the command. The motors roared. A faint cheer broke from the lips of the men behind the barricade. The armored cars gained speed. They left the defile of the pass. Suddenly they broke upon the sight of the Zollarian host.

For a moment it seemed to falter all along the line as the motors left the road and deployed now in their turn to right and left. Then, with a shout, a flashing chariot dashed from their ranks and headed with plunging gnuppas at Croft's own machine. Crash! Crash! Two of the gnuppas were down. The chariot was overturned in a smother of dust and flying hoofs as the stricken creatures dragged their teammates with them in their fall. Croft's motor advanced. The whole line of unwieldy shapes rolled forward. They began to spit acrid smoke and flame.

Crash, crash! The trenches opened fire, shooting above the moving motors toward the Zollarians' ranks.

Men went down in a swift dissolution. Some one sounded the charge. Zollaria's manhood answered the summon to their manhood. They surged ahead in a roar-

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ing human flood. The motors were engulfed, but still they spat fire. Men gathered about them and sought to overturn them. They died. The press of the charge passed toward the hill. The motors lumbered about and fired into the rear of the storming forces. They squatted on the plain and sent a stream of death into the backs of their foes.

And in the faces of those foes a stream of death was pouring. Rifles blazed and grenades began exploding along the sides of the hills. Still they stormed up. This was Zollaria's day—*the day*—the thing they dreamed of, planned for, through fifty years.

Only by degrees could the thought of certain success begin to waver in the minds of the men in that charge. Some of them died on the hillside. Some of them reached to the lip of the trenches themselves and died. Some of them entered the defile and found the barricade and died before it under the blast of its rifles and the grenades hurled down upon them from its edge. And all the while the glistening motors squatted on the plain or ambled slowly toward the hillsides, spitting flame, while other men died.

So in the end Zollaria's men began at first to doubt and then to fear. In front was death, and death was at their backs. Turn where they would that fiery, unknown, roaring death spat at them. The air was full of it. The very ground seemed to leap into flame at their feet and carry death. They wavered. They turned. They fled. Bowmen, spearmen, chariot, and plume-tossing gnuppa, they streamed down the hillside and out on the plain. And after them came death—and death met them again from the metal-covered motors, which fired and fired into their mass as they retreated in fear.

CROFT saw them vanish over the rolling hill which had veiled their recent advance. He opened the door of his motor and called through a trumpet to two of the cars by number. They were under command of trusted men. He ordered them to take each two others and follow the beaten army, giving it neither respite nor ease while daylight should last. Himself he returned to the defile. It was a great hour, the greatest hour he had ever known in his life—the hour in which all he had promised was proven, all he had worked for was won. He climbed down and mounted the hill to where Jadgor stood.

"O king," he said. "To you for Tamarizia, I give back Mazhur, the lost state. Another meeting such as this and, I think, Zollaria will surely sue for peace."

Jadgor reached out and embraced him—to Croft's surprise. "Jasor of Nodhur—man of wonder!" he exclaimed. "Did I ever doubt Zitu had sent you to Tamarizia's salvation I do not doubt it now."

That night Croft camped where he was. The next day Belzor, with his Nodhurians, having made a forced march from Niera, came up. Gazing on the body-strewn hillside and plain he wept with disappointment not to have been present to witness what took place.

Croft grinned. "Patience. The emperor himself leads the army against Cathur, some of the captives tell me. Today we advance."

Toward midnight his motors had come back to report the enemy still in flight and the road a mass of wounded who had fallen from exhaustion on the way. Croft's heart wept out to the poor devils, who were, after all, but the victims of their ruler's lust for power. Yet he could do little for them because of the lack of time and the fact that he passed through openly hostile territory now.

It had been somewhat different in Mazhur, where many of the inhabitants were Tamarizian still at heart. But here, should he leave men behind to attend the wounded, he knew, that if discovered, they would perish without any doubt. Hence beyond collecting them in one place, supplying them with provisions, and leaving the lesser wounded to wait upon the others, he could do nothing before he advanced on the main body of the enemy.

That advance lasted for a week. Twice, during it, Croft left his body, satisfied himself the state of things was safe, returned to earth, and chatted with Mrs. Goss and went back. At the end of the week he found himself once more facing a foe.

His first victory had produced a wonderful effect. Zollaria, driving Cathur before her like chaff, under Kyphallos's treacherous leadership, had made progress already when word of Croft's landing and advance from Niera had caused the Emperor Helmor to detach a portion of his army under his son to crush the flank attack. Instead, his son's command was crushed and recoiled in a sorry rout. Helmor faced about. Raging at this check to his plans, he rushed north and east to finish the Tamarizian army himself.

And now Croft found the positions re-

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versed. Helmor chose his own ground. He set himself to withstand the shock of battle along a line of gently rolling hills, up which his foe must advance to the attack. Thus his bowmen had a tremendous advantage, according to all his knowledge of war, and his spearmen, at close quarters, could give a most magnificient account of themselves, while the chariots, in the rear of the line, could take care of any small bands of the enemy which might chance to break through.

IN THIS case Croft put his motors in the front. Deploying his men, he instructed them to advance by rushes, keeping well in the rear of the sixteen machines, yet close enough to take advantage of any breaks they made in Helmor's line.

"This day will be the last," he said to Jadgor as he prepared to lead in his own machine.

"Zitu grant it, and victory with it!" Jadgor replied. "Should you carry defeat to Helmor, Tamarizia is yours, to do with as you please. Once before I would remind you, Jasor, I said well-nigh as much."

"There is but one thing in Tamarizia I desire." Croft looked at Lakkon as he spoke and smiled.

"It is yours, my son," said Aphur's prince, and spoke softly to Jadgor. "What think you, O king? Our Jasor desires a maid."

And Jadgor nodded. "Aye, Lakkon, I am not a fool! You are willing she should go to him?"

"I have pledged her to him," said Lakkon as he bowed his head.

"And I go to win her now," said Croft as he entered his car.

Naia of Aphur. That was the cry of his heart he carried into the fight. Naia of Aphur. This fight should make her his. He gave the signal for the advance with a smile upon his lips.

Like huge metal turtles the motors began crawling toward the hill where Helmor waited. Slowly, steadily, as implacable as fate, they rumbled ahead. And, after a time, their breath rose on the air of the cloudless morning in acrid whiffs of smoke. Flights of arrows and crossbow bolts rattled on their sides and fell harmless. They reached the foot of the hill and began to climb—up and up. They were half lost now in the smoke of their own fierce discharges and the clouds of flying shafts.

Back of them the infantry advanced as Croft directed, dashing forward a hundred yards, and dropping down to fire in crashing volleys which covered their comrades' sprinting rush, rising again and swarming ahead while the other end of their companies covered them in turn. On the hill confusion began to develop after a time. Men fell in heaps with a chance to strike back.

Nearer and nearer, without pause, the odd metal turtles crept up the hill. Nothing stopped them. Nothing, neither valor nor marksmanship, silenced the deadly spitting of their fire. Arrows broke upon them, cross-bolts slithered off their invulnerable hides. Nearer and nearer crept the menace of their ugly snouts.

On the right flank two reached the Zollarian line and crashed against it. Men fell and were ground into bloody pulp beneath metal wheels. The Zollarians tried. They flung themselves in waves upon the monsters. They sought to climb upon them. They gripped at the spitting rifle-barrels. But still the motors plowed on in a bloody foam. They turned and began crawling through the sea of men. Flesh and bone could stand no more. The right flank wavered and fled just before the infantry swarming up the slope in a final rush drove its own charge home. They fell back in a disorganized mob, flinging bows and spears from them as they ran.

They left the center unsupported, attacked from both front and side. It wavered, bent, sought to turn itself to meet the double-attack, broke in the process, and split asunder. Behind it, in his gorgeous chariot, Helmor raged to no avail. Through the mêlée a monster thing of metal bore down upon him. From it there came a brazen voice as of one speaking through a trumpet:

"Yield, Helmor of Zollaria, and put a stop to slaughter! Yield, Helmor, or perish with your men!"

This was the end. This was the fruition in blood and despair of that day prepared against through the span of fifty years. Thus was Zollaria's ambition sinking to destruction, smothered beneath the swirling dust of a panic-stricken ruck. Helmor swept the lost field with his eyes and knew the truth.

He gave the sign of surrender, spoke to his frightened aids, and sent them galloping on gnuppas right and left to carry the word of defeat. A standard shot up from the top of Croft's car. The sounds of battle ceased by degrees and died as car after car raised a similar signal across the battle-front.

Croft opened the door of his car and stepped down. "You will enter, Helmor of

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Zollaria," he said shortly, and gestured to the door.

The Emperor Helmor bowed. He bent his haughty crest and disappeared from sight. The door closed behind him, shutting him safe beyond all dreams of conquest for all time to come. The great car turned and lumbered back down the hill toward the camp where Jadgor of Aphur had waited and watched. The sun was at its zenith above a field of dead and wounded. But Helmor's sun of ambition had set.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CONSUMMATION

THESE are the things Croft told me. It was three o'clock in the morning when he was done. "That was a month ago, Dr. Murray," he said, and sighed.

"But what became of Kyphallos?" I asked.

Croft smiled. "Kyphallos was placed under arrest and tried with speed," he replied. "He was sentenced to exile in that Zollaria he had tried to aid in her plans. He went forth in a rather boastful fashion and appeared at the capital, Berla, itself. But neither Helmor nor the tawny Kalamita would have aught to do with him since he could be of no further use to them. Only then I think did Kyphallos realize his true position, because then he drew himself up before Kalamita and asked her, for all time, to say he was nothing to her.

She replied with a sneering laugh.

Kyphallos gave her one look, drew his sword, held it before his breast, and fell upon it and died.

"And the maid?" I asked. "Pardon me, Croft, but I'm human! And like all human beings I recognize love as the mainspring of existence."

He laughed. "As it is—love, Murray, is life—the cause of all being. The maid is mine, or shall be so, soon as I return."

"You're going back?" I said.

He gave me a glance. "Of course. I ask nothing better. God, man, don't you understand that she waits for me—there? Oh, yes, I've seen her since Zollaria was beaten! I've held her in my arms—felt her lips. The wedding-day is set. It is to be in Himyra, with Magur as the priest. Man, can't you understand?"

"What?" I inquired.

His laugh came again. But it was nervous. "You rather force me to blow my own horn. Murray, I'm Tamarizia today. When we returned to Zitra victors and learned that Robur had driven the Maz-

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did — Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do — well — there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well — this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be — all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 909, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was. — Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

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zerians like chaff before the wind, and that Milidhur, outside of a skirmish or two, had found nothing to do, Tamhys gave me new rank. He named me Prince of Zitra, a title never known in Tamarizia before, but next in importance to the imperial throne. Man, I could have been emperor had I wished since Tamhys's term expired one week after we got back."

"Could have been?" I said.

"Yes." He smiled. "But—I didn't take it. Do you know what I did?"

"Hardly." I shook my head.

"You might deduce it," he returned. "Murray, Tamarizia is a republic now. She was ready for it. She had come nearly to it before I arrived. There was no reason why she should not set up a true democracy. When they offered me the crown I replied with a request. I called for a council of the states. I put the thing squarely before them. They hailed the suggestion with acclaim. My word was law, Murray—law.

"Last night when you called me back and I returned, do you know what was being done? Certainly not. But—we were completing the draft of the republican constitution. Nothing less. When I returned I found them clustered about me—those nobles of the nation. They thought me in a faint, all save Jadgor and Lakkon and Robur, of course. I caught their eyes and knew they understood. But I said nothing, and we finished the draft last night.

"Now Jasor's body, which I have used, lies in Zud's own room in the Zitra pyramid. It is guarded by a priest. Above it, between it and the Temple of Zitu, Murray, between it and God, Naia of Aphur is waiting, a virgin guarded by Virgins for my return, in that room where Ga, the eternal woman, broods above the sacred fire. Think you I shall not go back?"

"No—I think I would go myself if I could," I replied.

His eyes filled with a far-away look. "Earth is beautiful," he said. "I love it, its mountains and valleys, its streams and lakes, its fields of grass and flowers, but, Murray—there is something, some one now in my life I love beyond anything else. Man, I have found my mate. Like the moose of the great woods, I must answer her call.

"I shall go back. I shall make Naia of Aphur my wife. There will be an election to select a president of the new republic. I have been asked to put up my name. I think—no, Murray, I am sure, that Naia shall be the first lady of all Tamarizia at Zitra itself before long."

"And your body here? What will you do? Shall you tell her the truth?"

"Yes, I think so," he declared. "Truth is a wonderful thing. It should be kept sacred between a man and his mate. Were that done more commonly by man and his consort half the marital trouble of the world would disappear. But—what need have I of an earthly body any more?

"My life calls me to Palos. Henceforth I am through with earth. Hence, Murray, my friend, when I return from this final excursion, I shall do what I have never done before. I shall snap the invisible bond between this body and my spirit, which, until now, I have held intact. I shall remain here a very few days to perform some necessary tasks. I must provide for Mrs. Goss, and I desire my estate to be given to some foundation for the welfare of my race. Then—then, Murray—I shall go to the woman I love—Naia—my God-given mate!"

THIS is the story he told me that afternoon and night. Was he sane? I think so. Was the story true? I cannot say. And yet somewhere I feel that Jason Croft is living today—that he is happy, that he has won his great adventure, and that Naia of Aphur, that maid of the golden hair and purple eyes, is truly now his wife.

One thing I can set down with positive knowledge at the end. A week from the first time she called me, Mrs. Goss came to me again. I went with her to the great couch in Croft's study and—I found him dead! His body lay there lifeless, rigid and cold beyond any power of mine to help. It came over me that the man had kept his word and broken the subtle thread between it and his spirit, just as he had said he would. I straightened and told Mrs. Goss there was nothing I could do.

She wiped her dark, old eyes. "I knowed it," she said, "I knowed it! Somethin' told me I was goin' to lose him this time! I've knowed him from a baby, Dr. Murray. He was always a very strange man."

The story you have just read is one of a trilogy and the next one will be published in several months. The title of the second of the three stories is "The Mouthpiece of Zitu".

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The Colour Out of Space

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

Here is one of the great masterpieces of modern fantasy, procured for the readers of F.F.M. in response to hundreds of requests for a story by the late popular author. It is well known to be a tale that, once read, can never be forgotten

WEST of Arkham the hills rise wild, and there are valleys with deep woods that no axe has ever cut. There are dark narrow glens where the trees slope fantastically, and where thin brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glint of sunlight. On the gentler slopes there are farms, ancient and rocky, with squat, moss-coated cottages brooding eternally over old New England secrets in the lee of great ledges; but these are all vacant now, the wide chimneys crumbling and the shingled sides bulging perilously beneath low gambrel roofs.

The old folk have gone away, and foreigners do not like to live there. French-Canadians have tried it, Italians have tried it, and the Poles have come and departed. It is not because of anything that can be seen or heard or handled, but because of something that is imagined. The place is not good for imagination, and does not bring restful dreams at night. It must be this which keeps the foreigners away, for old Ammi Pierce has never told them of anything he recalls from the strange days. Ammi, whose head has been a little queer for years, is the only one who still remains, or who ever talks of the strange days; and he dares to do this because his house is so near the open fields and the travelled roads around Arkham.

There was once a road over the hills and through the valleys, that ran straight where the blasted heath is now; but people ceased to use it and a new road was laid curving far toward the south. Traces of the old one can still be found even when half the hollows are flooded for the new reservoir. Then the dark woods will be cut down and the blasted heath will slumber far below blue waters whose surface will mirror the sky and ripple in the sun. And the secrets of the strange days will be one with the deep's secrets; one with the hidden lore of old ocean, and all the mystery of primal earth.

When I went into the hills and vales to survey for the new reservoir they told me the place was evil. They told me this in Arkham, and because that is a very old town full of witch legends I thought the evil must be something which grandmas had whispered to children through centuries. The name "blasted heath" seemed to me very odd and theatrical, and I wondered how it had come into the folklore of a Puritan people. Then I saw that dark westward tangle of glens and slopes for myself, and ceased to wonder at anything besides its own elder mystery. It was morning when I saw it, but shadow lurked always there. The trees grew too thickly, and their trunks were too big for any healthy New England wood. There was too much silence in the dim alleys between

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It was a monstrous constellation of unnatural light, like a glutted swarm of corpse-fed fireflies dancing hellish sarabands. . . . The shaft of phosphorescence from the well grew brighter and brighter, bringing to the minds of the huddled men a sense of doom. . . .

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them, and the floor was too soft with the dank moss and mattings of infinite years of decay.

In the open spaces, mostly along the the line of the old road, there were little hillside farms; sometimes with all the buildings standing, sometimes with only one or two, and sometimes with only a lone chimney or fast-filling cellar. Weeds and briers reigned, and furtive wild things rustled in the undergrowth. Upon everything was a haze of restlessness and oppression; a touch of the unreal and the grotesque, as if some vital element of perspective or chiaroscuro were awry. I did not wonder that the foreigners would not stay, for this was no region to sleep in. It was too much like a landscape of Salvator Rosa; too much like some forbidden woodcut in a tale of terror.

But even all this was not so bad as the blasted heath. I knew it the moment I came upon it at the bottom of a spacious valley; for no other name could fit such a thing, or any other thing fit such a name. It was as if the poet had coined the phrase from having seen this one particular region. It must, I thought as I viewed it, be the outcome of a fire; but why had nothing new ever grown over those five acres of grey desolation that sprawled open to the sky like a great spot eaten by acid in the woods and fields? It lay largely to the north of the ancient road line, but encroached a little on the other side. I felt an odd reluctance about approaching, and did so at last only because my business took me through and past it. There was no vegetation of any kind on that broad expanse, but only a fine grey dust or ash which no wind seemed ever to blow about. The trees near it were sickly and stunted, and many dead trunks stood or lay rotting at the rim. As I walked hurriedly by I saw the tumbled bricks and stones of an old chimney and cellar on my right, and the yawning black maw of an abandoned well whose stagnant vapours played strange tricks with the hues of the sunlight. Even the long, dark woodland climb beyond seemed welcome in contrast, and I marvelled no more at the frightened whispers of Arkham people. There had been no house or ruin near; even in the old days the place must have been lonely and remote. And at twilight, dreading to repass that ominous spot, I walked circuitously back to the town by the curving road on the south. I vaguely wished some clouds would gather, for an odd timidity about the deep skyey voids above had crept into my soul.

IN THE evening I asked old people in Arkham about the blasted heath, and what was meant by that phrase "strange days" which so many evasively muttered. I could not, however, get any good answers, except that all the mystery was much more recent than I had dreamed. It was not a matter of old legendry at all, but something within the lifetime of those who spoke. It had happened in the 'eighties, and a family had disappeared or was killed. Speakers would not be exact; and because they all told me to pay no attention to old Ammi Pierce's crazy tales, I sought him out the next morning, having heard that he lived alone in the ancient tottering cottage where the trees first begin to get very thick. It was a fearsomely ancient place, and had begun to exude the faint miasmal odour which clings about houses that have stood too long. Only with persistent knocking could I rouse the aged man, and when he shuffled timidly to the door I could tell he was not glad to see me. He was not so feeble as I had expected; but his eyes drooped in a curious way, and his unkempt clothing and white beard made him seem very worn and dismal.

Not knowing just how he could best be launched on his tales, I feigned a matter of business; told him of my surveying, and asked vague questions about the district. He was far brighter and more educated than I had been led to think, and before I knew if had grasped quite as much of the subject as any man I had talked with in Arkham. He was not like other rustics I had known in the sections where reservoirs were to be. From him there were no protests at the miles of old wood and farmland to be blotted out, though perhaps there would have been had not his home lain outside the bounds of

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the future lake. Relief was all that he showed; relief at the doom of the dark ancient valleys through which he had roamed all his life. They were better under water now—better under water since the strange days. And with this opening his husky voice sank low, while his body leaned forward and his right forefinger began to point shakily and impressively.

It was then that I heard the story, and as the rambling voice scraped and whispered on I shivered again and again despite the summer day. Often I had to recall the speaker from ramblings, piece out scientific points which he knew only by a fading parrot memory of professors' talk, or bridge over gaps, where his sense of logic and continuity broke down. When he was done I did not wonder that his mind had snapped a trifle, or that the folk of Arkham would not speak much of the blasted heath. I hurried back before sunset to my hotel, unwilling to have the stars come out above me in the open; and the next day returned to Boston to give up my position. I could not go into that dim chaos of old forest and slope again, or face another time that grey blasted heath where the black well yawned deep beside the tumbled bricks and stones. The reservoir will soon be built now, and all those elder secrets will be safe forever under watery fathoms. But even then I do not believe I would like to visit that country by night—at least not when the sinister stars are out; and nothing could bribe me to drink the new city water of Arkham.

It all began, old Ammi said, with the meteorite. Before that time there had been no wild legends at all since the witch trials, and even then these western woods were not feared half so much as the small island in the Miskatonic where the devil held court beside a curious stone altar older than the Indians. These were not haunted woods, and their fantastic dusk was never terrible till the strange days. Then there had come that white noontide cloud, that string of explosions in the air, and that pillar of smoke from the valley far in the wood. And by night all Arkham had heard of the great rock that fell out of the sky and bedded itself in the ground beside the well at the Nahum Gardner place. That was the house which had stood where the blasted heath was to come—the trim white Nahum Gardner house amidst its fertile gardens and orchards.

Nahum had come to town to tell people about the stone, and dropped in at Ammi Pierce's on the way. Ammi was forty then, and all the queer things were fixed very strongly in his mind. He and his wife had gone with the three professors from Miskatonic University who hastened out the next morning to see the weird visitor from unknown stellar space, and had wondered why Nahum had called it so large the day before. It had shrunk, Nahum said as he pointed out the big brownish mound above the ripped earth and charred grass near the archaic well-sweep in his front yard; but the wise men answered that stones do not shrink. Its heat lingered persistently, and Nahum declared it had glowed faintly in the night. The professors tried it with a geologist's hammer and found it was oddly soft. It was, in truth, so soft as to be almost plastic; and they gouged rather than chipped a specimen to take back to the college for testing. They took it in an old pail borrowed from Nahum's kitchen, for even the small piece refused to grow cool. On the trip back they stopped at Ammi's to rest, and seemed thoughtful when Mrs. Pierce remarked that the fragment was growing smaller and burning the bottom of the pail. Truly, it was not large, but perhaps they had taken less than they thought.

The day after that—all this was in June of '82—the professors had trooped out again in a great excitement. As they passed Ammi's they told him what queer things the specimen had done, and how it had faded wholly away when they put it in a glass beaker. The beaker had gone, too, and the wise men talked of the strange stone's affinity for silicon. It had acted quite unbelievably in that well-ordered laboratory; doing nothing at all and showing no occluded gases when heated on charcoal, being wholly negative in the borax bead, and soon proving itself absolutely nonvolatile at any producible temperature, including that of the oxy-hydro-

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gen blowpipe. On an anvil it appeared highly malleable, and in the dark its luminosity was very marked. Stubbornly refusing to grow cool, it soon had the college in a state of real excitement; and when upon heating before the spectroscope it displayed shining bands unlike any known colours of the normal spectrum there was much breathless talk of new elements, bizarre optical properties, and other things which puzzled men of science are wont to say when faced by the unknown.

Hot as it was, they tested it in a crucible with all the proper reagents. Water did nothing. Hydrochloric acid was the same. Nitric acid and even aqua regia merely hissed and spattered against its torrid invulnerability. Ammi had difficulty in recalling all these things, but recognized some solvents as I mentioned them in the usual order of use. There were ammonia and caustic soda, alcohol and ether, nauseous carbon disulphide and a dozen others; but although the weight grew steadily less as time passed, and the fragment seemed to be slightly cooling, there was no change in the solvents to show that they had attacked the substance at all. It was a metal, though, beyond a doubt. It was magnetic, for one thing; and after its immersion in the acid solvents there seemed to be faint traces of the Widmänstätten figures found on meteoric iron. When the cooling had grown very considerable the testing was carried on in glass; and it was in a glass beaker that they left all chips made of the original fragment during the work. The next morning both chips and beaker were gone without trace, and only a charred spot marked the place on the wooden shelf where they had been.

ALL this the professors told Ammi as they paused at his door, and once more he went with them to see the stony messenger from the stars, though this time his wife did not accompany him. It had now most certainly shrunk, and even the sober professors could not doubt the truth of what they saw. All around the dwindling brown lump near the well was a vacant space, except where the earth had caved in; and whereas it had been a good seven feet across the day before, it was now scarcely five. It was still hot, and the sages studied its surface curiously as they detached another and larger piece with hammer and chisel. They gouged deeply this time, and as they pried away the smaller mass they saw that the core of the thing was not quite homogeneous.

They had uncovered what seemed to be the side of a large coloured globule embedded in the substance. The colour, which resembled some of the bands in the meteor's strange spectrum, was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all. Its texture was glossy, and upon tapping it appeared to promise both brittleness and hollowness. One of the professors gave it a smart blow with a hammer, and it burst with a nervous little pop. Nothing was emitted, and all trace of the thing vanished with the puncturing. It left behind a hollow spherical space about three inches across, and all thought it probable that others would be discovered as the enclosing substance wasted away.

Conjecture was vain; so after a futile attempt to find additional globules by drilling, the seekers left again with their new specimen—which proved, however, as baffling in the laboratory as its predecessor. Aside from being almost plastic, having an unknown spectrum, wasting away in air, and attacking silicon compounds with mutual destruction as a result, it presented no identifying features whatsoever; and at the end of the tests the college scientists were forced to own that they could not place it. It was nothing of this earth, but a piece of the great outside; and as such dowered with outside properties and obedient to outside laws.

That night there was a thunderstorm, and when the professors went out to Nahum's the next day they met with a bitter disappointment. The stone, magnetic as it had been, must have had some peculiar electrical property; for it had "drawn the lightning," as Nahum said, with a singular persistence. Six times within an hour the farmer saw the lightning strike the furrow in the front yard, and when the storm was over nothing remained but a ragged pit by

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the ancient well-sweep, half-choked with a caved-in earth. Digging had borne no fruit, and the scientists verified the fact of the utter vanishment. The failure was total; so that nothing was left to do but go back to the laboratory and test again the disappearing fragment left carefully cased in lead. That fragment lasted a week, at the end of which nothing of value had been learned of it. When it had gone, no residue was left behind, and in time the professors felt scarcely sure they had indeed seen with waking eyes that cryptic vestige of the fathomless gulfs outside; that lone, weird message from other universes and other realms of matter, force, and entity.

As was natural, the Arkham papers made much of the incident with its collegiate sponsoring, and sent reporters to talk with Nahum Gardner and his family. At least one Boston daily also sent a scribe, and Nahum quickly became a kind of local celebrity. He was a lean, genial person of about fifty, living with his wife and three sons on the pleasant farmstead in the valley. He and Ammi exchanged visits frequently, as did their wives; and Ammi had nothing but praise for him after all these years. He seemed slightly proud of the notice his place had attracted, and talked often of the meteorite in the succeeding weeks. That July and August were hot; and Nahum worked hard at his haying in the ten-acre pasture across Chapman's Brook; his rattling wain wearing deep ruts in the shadow lanes between. The labour tired him more than it had other years, and he felt that age was beginning to tell on him.

Then fell the time of fruit and harvest. The pears and apples slowly ripened, and Nahum vowed that his orchards were prospering as never before. The fruit was growing to phenomenal size and unwonted gloss, and in such abundance that extra barrels were ordered to handle the future crop. But with the ripening came sore disappointment, for of all that gorgeous array of specious lusciousness not one single jot was fit to eat. Into the fine flavour of the pears and apples had crept a stealthy bitterness and sickishness, so that even the smallest bites induced a lasting disgust. It was the same with the melons and tomatoes, and Nahum sadly saw that his entire crop was lost. Quick to connect events, he declared that the meteorite had poisoned the soil, and thanked Heaven that most of the other crops were in the upland lot along the road.

WINTER came early, and was very cold. Ammi saw Nahum less often than usual and observed that he had begun to look worried. The rest of his family too, seemed to have grown taciturn; and were far from steady in their churchgoing or their attendance at the various social events of the countryside. For this reserve or melancholy no cause could be found, though all the household confessed now and then to poorer health and a feeling of vague disquiet. Nahum himself gave the most definite statement of anyone when he said he was disturbed about certain footprints in the snow. They were the usual winter prints of red squirrels, white rabbits, and foxes, but the brooding farmer professed to see something not quite right about their nature and arrangement. He was never specific, but appeared to think that they were not as characteristic of the anatomy and habits of squirrels and rabbits and foxes as they ought to be. Ammi listened without interest to this talk until one night when he drove past Nahum's house in his sleigh on the way back from Clark's Corners. There had been a moon, and a rabbit had run across the road, and the leaps of that rabbit were longer than either Ammi or his horse liked. The latter, indeed, had almost run away when brought up by a firm rein. Thereafter Ammi gave Nahum's tales more respect, and wondered why the Gardner dogs seemed so cowed and quivering every morning. They had, it developed, nearly lost the spirit to bark.

In February, the McGregor boys from Meadow Hill were out shooting woodchucks, and not far from the Gardner place bagged a very peculiar specimen. The proportions of its body seemed slightly altered in a queer way impossible to describe, while its face had taken on an ex-

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pression which no one ever saw in a woodchuck before. The boys were genuinely frightened, and threw the thing away at once, so that only their grotesque tales of it ever reached the people of the countryside. But the shying of horses near Nahum's house had now become an acknowledged thing, and all the basis for a cycle of whispered legend was fast taking form.

People vow that the snow melted faster around Nahum's than it did anywhere else, and early in March there was an awed discussion in Potter's general store at Clark's Corners. Stephen Rice had driven past Gardner's in the morning, and had noticed the skunk-cabbage coming up through the mud by the woods across the road. Never were things of such size seen before, and they held strange colours that could not be put into any words. Their shapes were monstrous, and the horse had snorted at an odour which struck Stephen as wholly unprecedented. That afternoon several persons drove past to see the abnormal growth, and all agreed that plants of that kind ought never to sprout in a healthy world. The bad fruit of the fall before was freely mentioned, and it went from mouth to mouth that there was poison in Nahum's ground. Of course it was the meteorite; and remembering how strange the men from the college had found that stone to be, several farmers spoke about the matter to them.

One day they paid Nahum a visit; but having no love of wild tales and folklore were very conservative in what they inferred. The plants were certainly odd, but all skunk-cabbages are more or less odd in shape and hue. Perhaps some mineral element from the stone had entered the soil, but it would soon be washed away. And as for the footprints and frightened horses—of course this was mere country talk which such a phenomenon as the aerolite would be certain to start. There was really nothing for serious men to do in cases of wild gossip, for supersititious rustics will say and believe anything. And so all through the strange days the professors stayed away in contempt. Only one of them, when given two phials of dust for analysis in a police job over a year and a half later, recalled that the queer colour of that skunk-cabbage had been very like one of the anomalous bands of light shown by the meteor fragment in the college spectroscope, and like the brittle globule found imbedded in the stone from the abyss. The samples in this analysis case gave the same odd bands at first, though later they lost the property.

The trees budded prematurely around Nahum's, and at night they swayed ominously in the wind. Nahum's second son Thaddeus a lad of fifteen, swore that they swayed also when there was no wind; but even the gossips would not credit this. Certainly, however, restlessness was in the air. The entire Gardner family developed the habit of stealthy listening, though not for any sound which they could consciously name. The listening was, indeed, rather a product of moments when consciousness seemed half to slip away. Unfortunately such moments increased week by week, till it became common speech that "something was wrong with all Nahum's folks." When the early saxifrage came out it had another strange colour; not quite like that of the skunk-cabbage, but plainly related and equally unknown to anyone who saw it. Nahum took some blossoms to Arkham and showed them to the editor of the *Gazette,* but that dignitary did no more than write a humorous article about them, in which the dark fears of rustics were held up to polite ridicule. It was a mistake of Nahum's to tell a stolid city man about the way the great, overgrown mourning-cloak butterflies behaved in connection with these saxifrages.

APRIL brought a kind of madness to the country folk, and began that disuse of the road past Nahum's which led to its utimate abandonment. It was the vegetation. All the orchard trees blossomed forth in strange colours, and through the stony soil of the yard and adjacent pasturage there sprang up a bizarre growth which only a botanist could connect with the proper flora of the region. No sane wholesome colours were anywhere to be seen except in the green grass

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and leafage; but everywhere were those hectic and prismatic variants of some diseased, underlying primary tone without a place among the known tints of earth. The "Dutchman's breeches" became a thing of sinister menace, and the bloodroots grew insolent in their chromatic perversion. Ammi and the Gardners thought that most of the colours had a sort of haunting familiarity, and decided that they reminded one of the brittle globule in the meteor. Nahum ploughed and sowed the ten-acre pasture and the upland lot, but did nothing with the land around the house. He knew it would be of no use, and hoped that the summer's strange growths would draw all the poison from the soil. He was prepared for almost anything now, and had grown used to the sense of something near him waiting to be heard. The shunning of his house by neighbors told on him, of course; but it told on his wife more. The boys were better off, being at school each day; but they could not help being frightened by the gossip. Thaddeus, an especially sensitive youth, suffered the most.

In May the insects came, and Nahum's place became a nightmare of buzzing and crawling. Most of the creatures seemed not quite usual in their aspects and motions, and their nocturnal habits contradicted all former experience. The Gardners took to watching at night—watching in all directions at random for something—they could not tell what. It was then that they all owned that Thaddeus had been right about the trees. Mrs. Gardner was the next to see it from the window as she watched the swollen boughs of a maple against a moonlit sky. The boughs surely moved, and there was no wind. It must be the sap. Strangeness had come into everything growing now. Yet it was none of Nahum's family at all who made the next discovery. Familiarity had dulled them, and what they could not see was glimpsed by a timid windmill salesman from Bolton who drove by one night in ignorance of the country legends. What he told in Arkham was given a short paragraph in the *Gazette;* and it was there that all the farmers, Nahum included, saw it first. The night had been dark and the buggy-lamps faint, but around a farm in the valley which everyone knew from the account must be Nahum's, the darkness had been less thick. A dim though distinct luminosity seemed to adhere in all the vegetation, grass, leaves, and blossoms alike, while at one moment a detached piece of the phosphorescence appeared to stir furtively in the yard near the barn.

The grass had so far seemed untouched, and the cows were freely pastured in the lot near the house, but toward the end of May the milk began to be bad. Then Nahum had the cows driven to the uplands, after which this trouble ceased. Not long after this the change in grass and leaves became apparent to the eye. All the verdure was going grey, and was developing a highly singular quality of brittleness. Ammi was now the only person who ever visited the place, and his visits were becoming fewer and fewer. When school closed the Gardners were virtually cut off from the world, and sometimes let Ammi do their errands in town. They were failing curiously both physically and mentally, and no one was surprised when the news of Mrs. Gardner's madness stole around.

It happened in June, about the anniversary of the meteor's fall, and the poor woman screamed about things in the air which she could not describe. In her raving there was not a single specific noun, but only verbs and pronouns. Things moved and changed and fluttered, and ears tingled to impulses which were not wholly sounds. Something was taken away—she was being drained of something—something was fastening itself on her that ought not to be—someone must make it keep off—nothing was ever still in the night—the walls and windows shifted. Nahum did not send her to the county asylum, but let her wander about the house as long as she was harmless to herself and others. Even when her expression changed he did nothing. But when the boys grew afraid of her, and Thaddeus nearly fainted at the way she made faces at him, he decided to keep her locked in the attic. By July she

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had ceased to speak and crawled on all fours, and before that month was over Nahum got the mad notion that she was slightly luminous in the dark, as he now clearly saw was the case with the nearby vegetation.

It was a little before this that the horses had stampeded. Something had aroused them in the night, and their neighing and kicking in their stalls had been terrible. There seemed virtually nothing to do to calm them, and when Nahum opened the stable door they all bolted out like frightened woodland deer. It took a week to track all four, and when found they were seen to be quite useless and unmanageable. Something had snapped in their brains, and each one had to be shot for its own good. Nahum borrowed a horse from Ammi for his haying, but found it would not approach the barn. It shied, balked, and whinnied, and in the end he could no nothing but drive it into the yard while the men used their own strength to get the heavy wagon near enough to the hayloft for convenient pitching. And all the while the vegetation was turning grey and brittle. Even the flowers whose hues had been so strange were graying now, and the fruit was coming out grey and dwarfed and tasteless. The asters and goldenrod bloomed grey and distorted, and the roses and zinneas and hollyhocks in the front yard were such blasphemous-looking things that Nahum's oldest boy Zenas cut them down. The strangely puffed insects died about that time, even the bees that had left their hives and taken to the woods.

BY SEPTEMBER all the vegetation was fast crumbling to a greyish powder, and Nahum feared that the trees would die before the poison was out of the soil. His wife now had spells of terrific screaming, and he and the boys were in a constant state of nervous tension. They shunned people now, and when school opened the boys did not go. But it was Ammi, on one of his rare visits, who first realized that the well water was no longer good. It had an evil taste that was not exactly fetid nor exactly salty, and Ammi advised his friend to dig another well on higher ground to use till the soil was good again. Nahum, however, ignored the warning, for he had by that time become calloused to strange and unpleasant things. He and the boys continued to use the tainted supply, drinking it as listlessly and mechanically as they ate their meagre and ill-cooked meals and did their thankless and monotonous chores through the aimless days. There was something of stolid resignation about them all, as if they walked half in another world between lines of nameless guards to a certain and familiar doom.

Thaddeus went mad in September after a visit to the well. He had gone with a pail and had come back empty-handed, shrieking and waving his arms, and sometimes lapsing into an inane titter or a whisper about "the moving colours down there." Two in one family was pretty bad, but Nahum was very brave about it. He let the boy run about for a week until he began stumbling and hurting himself, and then he shut him in an attic room across the hall from his mother's. The way they screamed at each other from behind their locked doors was very terrible, especially to little Merwin, who fancied they talked in some terrible language that was not of earth. Merwin was getting frightfully imaginative, and his restlessness was worse after the shutting away of the brother who had been his greatest playmate.

Almost at the same time the mortality among the livestock commenced. Poultry turned greyish and died very quickly, their meat being found dry and noisome upon cutting. Hogs grew inordinately fat, then suddenly began to undergo loathsome changes which no one could explain. Their meat was of course useless, and Nahum was at his wit's end. No rural veterinary would approach his place, and the city veterinary from Arkham was openly baffled. The swine began growing grey and brittle and falling to pieces before they died, and their eyes and muzzles developed singular alterations. It was very inexplicable, for they had never been fed from the tainted vegetation. Then some-

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thing struck the cows. Certain areas or sometimes the whole body would be uncannily shrivelled or compressed, and atrocious collapses or disintegrations were common. In the last stages—and death was always the result—there would be a greying and turning brittle like that which beset the hogs. There could be no question of poison, for all the cases occurred in a locked and undisturbed barn. No bites of prowling things could have brought the virus, for what live beast of earth can pass through solid obstacles? It must be only natural disease—yet what disease could wreak such results was beyond any mind's guessing. When the harvest came there was not an animal surviving on the place, for the stock and poultry were dead and the dogs had run away. These dogs, three in number, had all vanished one night and were never heard of again. The five cats had left some time before, but their going was scarcely noticed since there now seemed to be no mice, and only Mrs. Gardner had made pets of the graceful felines.

On the nineteenth of October Nahum staggered into Ammi's house with hideous news. The death had come to poor Thaddeus in his attic room, and it had come in a way which could not be told. Nahum had dug a grave in the railed family plot behind the farm, and had put therein what he found. There could have been nothing from outside, for the small barred window and locked door were intact; but it was much as it had been in the barn. Ammi and his wife consoled the stricken man as best they could, but shuddered as they did so. Stark terror seemed to cling round the Gardners and all they touched, and the very presence of one in the house was a breath from regions unnamed and unnamable. Ammi accompanied Nahum home with the greatest reluctance, and did what he might to calm the hysterical sobbing of little Merwin. Zenas needed no calming. He had come of late to do nothing but stare into space and obey what his father told him; and Ammi thought that his fate was very merciful. Now and then Merwin's screams were answered faintly from the attic, and in response to an inquiring look Nahum said that his wife was getting very feeble. When night approached, Ammi managed to get away; for not even friendship could make him stay in that spot when the faint glow of the vegetation began and the trees may or may not have swayed without wind. It was really lucky for Ammi that he was not more imaginative. Even as things were, his mind was bent ever so slightly; but had he been able to connect and reflect upon all the portents around him he must inevitably have turned a total maniac. In the twilight he hastened home, the screams of the mad woman and the nervous child ringing horribly in his ears.

THREE days later Nahum burst into Ammi's kitchen in the early morning, and in the absence of his host stammered out a desperate tale once more, while Mrs. Pierce listened in a clutching fright. It was little Merwin this time. He was gone. He had gone out late at night with a lantern and pail for water, and had never come back. He'd been going to pieces for days, and hardly knew what he was about. Screamed at everything. There had been a frantic shriek from the yard then, but before the father could get to the door the boy was gone. There was no glow from the lantern he had taken, and of the child himself no trace. At the time Nahum thought the lantern and pail were gone too; but when dawn came, and the man plodded back from his all-night search of the woods and fields, he had found some very curious things near the well. There was a crushed and apparently somewhat melted mass of iron which had certainly been the lantern; while a bent handle and twisted iron hoops beside it, both half-fused, seemed to hint at the remnants of the pail. That was all. Nahum was past imagining, Mrs. Pierce was blank, and Ammi, when he had reached home and heard the tale, could give no guess. Merwin was gone, and there would be no use in telling the people around, who shunned all Gardners now. No use, either, in telling the city people at Arkham who laughed at everything. Thad was gone, and now Merwin was gone. Something

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was creeping and creeping and waiting to be seen and heard. Nahum would go soon, and he wanted Ammi to look after his wife and Zenas if they survived him. It must all be a judgment of some sort; though he could not fancy what for, since he had always walked uprightly in the Lord's ways so far as he knew.

For over two weeks Ammi saw nothing of Nahum; and then, worried about what might have happened, he overcame his fears and paid the Gardner place a visit. There was no smoke from the great chimney, and for a moment the visitor was apprehensive of the worst. The aspect of the whole farm was shocking—greyish withered grass and leaves on the ground, vines falling in brittle wreckage from archaic walls and gables, and great bare trees clawing up at the grey November sky with a studied malevolence which Ammi could not but feel had come from some subtle change in the tilt of the branches. But Nahum was alive, after all. He was weak, and lying on a couch in the low-ceiled kitchen, but perfectly conscious and able to give simple orders to Zenas. The room was deadly cold; and as Ammi visibly shivered, the host shouted huskily to Zenas for more wood. Wood, indeed, was sorely needed; since the cavernous fireplace was unlit and empty, with a cloud of soot blowing about in the chill wind that came down the chimney. Presently Ammi saw what had happened. The stoutest cord had broken at last, and the hapless father's mind was proof against more sorrow.

Questioning tactfully, Ammi could get no clear data at all about the missing Zenas. "In the well—he lives in the well—" was all that the clouded father would say. Then there flashed across the visitor's mind a sudden thought of the mad wife, and he changed his line of inquiry. "Nabby? Why, here she is!" was the surprised response of poor Nahum, and Ammi soon saw that he must search for himself. Leaving the harmless babbler on the couch, he took the keys from their nail beside the door and climbed the creaking stairs to the attic. It was very close and noisome up there, and no sound could be heard from any direction. Of the four doors in sight, only one was locked, and on this he tried various keys of the ring he had taken. The third key proved the right one, and after some fumbling Ammi threw open the low white door.

It was quite dark inside, for the window was small and half-obscured by the crude wooden bars; and Ammi could see nothing at all on the wide-planked floor. The stench was beyond enduring, and before proceeding further he had to retreat to another room and return with his lungs filled with breathable air. When he did enter he saw something dark in the corner, and upon seeing it more clearly he screamed outright. While he screamed he thought a momentary cloud eclipsed the window, and a second later he felt himself brushed as if by some hateful current of vapour. Strange colours danced before his eyes; and had not a present horror numbed him he would have thought of the globule in the meteor that the geologist's hammer had shattered, and of the morbid vegetation that had sprouted in the spring. As it was he thought only of the blasphemous monstrosity which confronted him, and which all too clearly had shared the nameless fate of young Thaddeus and the livestock. But the terrible thing about the horror was that it very slowly and perceptibly moved as it continued to crumble.

AMMI would give me no added particulars of this scene, but the shape in the corners does not reappear in his tale as a moving object. There are things which cannot be mentioned, and what is done in common humanity is sometimes cruelly judged by the law. I gathered that no moving thing was left in that attic room, and that to leave anything capable of motion there would have been a deed so monstrous as to damn any accountable being to eternal torment. Anyone but a stolid farmer would have fainted or gone mad, but Ammi walked consciously through that low doorway and locked the accursed secret behind him. There would be Nahum to deal with now; he must be fed and tended, and removed to some place where he could be cared for.

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Commencing his descent of the dark stairs, Ammi heard a thud below him. He even thought a scream had been suddenly choked off, and recalled nervously the clammy vapour which had brushed by him in that frightful room above. What presence had his cry and entry started up? Halted by some vague fear, he heard still further sounds below. Indubitably there was a sort of heavy dragging, and a most detestably sticky noise as of some fiendish and unclean species of suction. With an associative sense goaded to feverish heights, he thought unaccountably of what he had seen upstairs. Good God! What eldritch dream-world was this into which he had blundered? He dared move neither backward nor forward, but stood there trembling at the black curve of the boxed-in staircase. Every trifle of the scene burned itself into his brain. The sounds, the sense of dread expectancy, the darkness, the steepness of the narrow steps—and merciful Heaven!—the faint but unmistakable luminosity of all the woodwork in sight; steps, sides, exposed laths, and beams alike.

Then there burst forth a frantic whinny from Ammi's horse outside, followed at once by a clatter which told of a frenzied runaway. In another moment horse and buggy had gone beyond earshot, leaving the frightened man on the dark stairs to guess what had sent them. But that was not all. There had been another sound out there. A sort of liquid splash—water—it must have been the well. He had left Hero untied near it, and a buggywheel must have brushed the coping and knocked in a stone. And still the pale phosphorescence glowed in that detestably ancient woodwork. God! how old the house was! Most of it built before 1670, and the gambrel roof no later than 1730.

A feeble scratching on the floor downstairs now sounded distinctly, and Ammi's grip tightened on a heavy stick he had picked up in the attic for some purpose. Slowly nerving himself, he finished his descent and walked boldly toward the kitchen. But he did not complete the walk, because what he sought was no longer there. It had come to meet him, and it was still alive after a fashion. Whether it had crawled or whether it had been dragged by any external forces, Ammi could not say; but the death had been at it. Everything had happened in the last half-hour, but collapse, greying, and disintegration were already far advanced. There was a horrible brittleness, and dry fragments were scaling off. Ammi could not touch it, but looked horrifiedly into the distorted parody that had been a face. "What was it, Nahum—what was it?" He whispered, and the cleft, bulging lips were just able to crackle out a final answer.

"Nothin' . . . nothin' . . . the colour . . . it burns . . . cold an' wet, but it burns . . . it lived in the well . . . I seen it . . . a kind of smoke . . . jest like the flowers last spring . . . the well shone at night . . . Thad an' Merwin an' Zenas . . . everything alive . . . suckin' the life out of everything . . . in that stone . . . it must a' come in that stone . . . pizened the whole place . . . dun't know what it wants . . . that round thing them men from the college dug outen the stone . . . they smashed it . . . it was that same colour . . . jest the same, like the flowers an' plants . . . must a' been more of 'em . . . seeds . . . seeds . . . they growed . . . I seen it the fust time this week . . . must a' got strong on Zenas . . . he was a big boy, full o' life . . . it beats down your mind an' then gits ye . . . burns ye up . . . in the well water . . . you was right about that . . . evil water . . . Zenas never come back from the well . . . can't git away . . . draws ye . . . ye know summ'at's comin' but tain't no use . . . I seen it time an' again senct Zenas was took . . . whar's Nabby, Ammi? . . . my head's no good . . . dun't know how long sense I fed her . . . it'll git her ef we ain't keerful . . . jest a colour . . . her face is gittin' to hev that colour sometimes towards night . . . an' it burns an' sucks . . . it come from some place whar things ain't as they is here . . . one o' them professors said so . . . he was right . . . look out, Ammi, it'll do suthin' more . . . sucks the life out . . . "

But that was all. That which spoke could speak no more because it had completely caved in. Ammi laid a red checked

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tablecloth over what was left and reeled out the back door into the fields. He climbed the slope to the ten-acre pasture and stumbled home by the north road and the woods. He could not pass that well from which his horses had run away. He had looked at it through the window, and had seen that no stone was missing from the rim. Then the lurching buggy had not dislodged anything after all—the splash had been something else—something which went into the well after it had done with poor Nahum.

WHEN Ammi reached his house the horses and buggy had arrived before him and thrown his wife into fits of anxiety. Reassuring her without explanations, he set out at once for Arkham and notified the authorities that the Gardner family was no more. He indulged in no details, but merely told of the deaths of Nahum and Nabby, that of Thaddeus being already known, and mentioned that the cause seemed to be the same strange ailment which had killed the live-stock. He also stated that Merwin and Zenas had disappeared. There was considerable questioning at the police station, and in the end Ammi was compelled to take three officers to the Gardner farm, together with the coroner, the medical examiner, and the veterinary who had treated the diseased animals. He went much against his will, for the afternoon was advancing and he feared the fall of night over that accursed place, but it was some comfort to have so many people with him.

The six men drove out in a democrat-wagon, following Ammi's buggy, and arrived at the pest-ridden farmhouse about four o'clock. Used as the officers were to gruesome experiences, not one remained unmoved at what was found in the attic and under the red checked tablecloth on the floor below. The whole aspect of the farm with its grey desolation was terrible enough, but those two crumbling objects were beyond all bounds. No one could look long at them, and even the medical examiner admitted that there was very little to examine. Specimens could be analyzed, of course, so he busied himself in obtaining them—and here it develops that a very puzzling aftermath occurred at the college laboratory where the two phials of dust were finally taken. Under the spectroscope both samples gave off an unknown spectrum, in which many of the baffling bands were precisely like those which the strange meteor had yielded in the previous year. The property of emitting this spectrum vanished in a month, the dust thereafter consisting mainly of alkaline phosphates and carbonates.

Ammi would not have told the men about the well if he had thought they meant to do anything then and there. It was getting toward sunset, and he was anxious to be away. But he could not help glancing nervously at the stony curb by the great sweep, and when a detective questioned him he admitted that Nahum had feared something down there—so much so that he had never even thought of searching it for Merwin or Zenas. After that nothing would do but that they empty and explore the well immediately, so Ammi had to wait trembling while pail after pail of rank water was hauled up and splashed on the soaking ground outside. The men sniffed in disgust at the fluid, and toward the last held their noses against the foetor they were uncovering. It was not so long a job as they had feared it would be, since the water was phenomenally low. There is no need to speak too exactly of what they found. Merwin and Zenas were both there, in part, though the vestiges were mainly skeletal. There were also a small deer and a large dog in about the same state, and a number of bones of small animals. The ooze and slime at the bottom seemed inexplicably porous and bubbling, and a man who descended on hand-holds with a long pole found that he could sink the wooden shaft to any depth in the mud of the floor without meeting any solid obstruction.

Twilight had now fallen, and lanterns were brought from the house. Then, when it was seen that nothing further could be gained from the well, everyone went indoors and conferred in the ancient sitting-room while the intermittent light of a spectral half-moon played wanly on the

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grey desolation outside. The men were frankly nonplussed by the entire case, and could find no convincing common element to link the strange vegetable conditions, the unknown disease of livestock and humans, and the unaccountable deaths of Merwin and Zenas in the tainted well. They had heard the common country talk, it is true; but could not believe that anything contrary to natural law had occurred. No doubt the meteor had poisoned the soil, but the illness of persons and animals who had eaten nothing grown in that soil was another matter. Was it the well water? Very possibly. It might be a good idea to analyze it. But what peculiar madness could have made both boys jump into the well? Their deeds were so similar—and the fragments showed that they had both suffered from the grey brittle death. Why was everything so grey and brittle?

It was the coroner, seated near a window overlooking the yard who first noticed the glow about the well. Night had fully set in, and all the abhorrent grounds seemed faintly luminous with more than the fitful moonbeams; but this new glow was something definite and distinct, and appeared to shoot up from the black pit like a softened ray from a searchlight, giving dull reflections in the little ground pools where the water had been emptied. It had a very queer colour, and as all the men clustered around the window Ammi gave a violent start. For this strange beam of ghastly miasma was to him of no unfamiliar hue. He had seen that colour before, and feared to think what it might mean. He had seen it in the nasty brittle globule in that aerolite two summers ago, had seen it in the crazy vegetation of the springtime, and had thought he had seen it for an instant that very morning against the small barred window of that terrible attic room where nameless things had happened. It had flashed there a second, and a clammy and hateful current of vapour had brushed past him—and then poor Nahum had been taken by something of that colour. He had said so at the last—said it was like the globule and the plants. After that had come the runaway in the yard and the splash in the well—and now that well was belching forth to the night a pale insidious beam of the same demoniac tint.

IT DOES credit to the alertness of Ammi's mind that he puzzled even at that tense moment over a point which was essentially scientific. He could not but wonder at his gleaning of the same impression from a vapour glimpsed in the daytime, against a window opening on the morning sky, and from a nocturnal exhalation seen as a phosphorescent mist against the black and blasted landscape. It wasn't right—it was against Nature—and he thought of those terrible last words of his stricken friend, "It come from some place whar things ain't as they is here . . . one of them professors said so . . . "

All three horses outside, tied to a pair of shrivelled saplings by the road, were now neighing and pawing frantically. The wagon driver started for the door to do something, but Ammi laid a shaky hand on his shoulder. "Dun't go out thar," he whispered. "They's more to this nor what we know. Nahum said somethin' lived in the well that sucks your life out. He said it must be some'at growed from a round ball like one we all seen in the meteor stone that fell a year ago June. Sucks an' burns, he said, an' is jest a cloud of colour like that light out thar now, that ye can hardly see an' can't tell what it is. Nahum thought it feeds on everything livin' an' gits stronger all the time. He said he seen it this last week. It must be somethin' from away off in the sky like the men from the college last year says the meteor stone was. The way it's made an' the way it works ain't like no way o' God's world. It's some'at from beyond."

So the men paused indecisively as the light from the well grew stronger and the hitched horses pawed and whinnied in increasing frenzy. It was truly an awful moment; with terror in that ancient and accursed house itself, four monstrous sets of fragments—two from the house and two from the well—in the woodshed behind, and that shaft of unknown and unholy iridescence from the slimy depths in

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front. Ammi had restrained the driver on impulse, forgetting how uninjured he himself was after the clammy brushing of that coloured vapour in the attic room, but perhaps it is just as well that he acted as he did. No one will ever know what was abroad that night; and though the blasphemy from beyond had not so far hurt any human of unweakened mind, there is no telling what it might not have done at that last moment, and with its seemingly increased strength and the special signs of purpose it was soon to display beneath the half-clouded moonlit sky.

All at once one of the detectives at the window gave a short, sharp gasp. The others looked at him, and then quickly followed his own gaze upward to the point at which its idle straying had been suddenly arrested. There was no need for words. What had been disputed in country gossip was disputable no longer, and it is because of the thing which every man of that party agreed in whispering later on, that the strange days are never talked about in Arkham. It is necessary to premise that there was no wind at that hour of the evening. One did arise not long afterward, but there was absolutely none then. Even the dry tips of the lingering hedge mustard, grey and blighted; and the fringe on the roof of the standing democrat-wagon were unstirred. And yet amid that tense, godless calm the high bare boughs of all the trees in the yard were moving. They were twitching morbidly and spasmodically, clawing in convulsive and epileptic madness at the moonlit clouds; scratching impotently in the noxious air as if jerked by some allied and bodiless line of linkage with subterrene horrors writhing and struggling below the black roots.

Not a man breathed for several seconds. Then a cloud of darker depth passed over the moon, and the silhouette of clutching branches faded out momentarily. At this there was a general cry; muffled with awe, but husky and almost identical from every throat. For the terror had not faded with the silhouette, and in a fearsome instant of deeper darkness and unhallowed radiance, tipping each bough like the fire of St. Elmo or the flames that come down on the apostle's heads at Pentecost. It was a monstrous constellation of unnatural light, like a glutted swarm of corpse-fed fireflies dancing hellish sarabands over an accursed marsh; and its colour was that same nameless intrusion which Ammi had come to recognize and dread. All the while the shaft of phosphorescence from the well was getting brighter and brighter, bringing to the minds of the huddled men, a sense of doom and abnormality which far outraced any image their conscious minds could form. It was no longer *shining* out; it was *pouring* out; and as the shapeless stream of unplaceable colour left the well it seemed to flow directly into the sky.

THE veterinary shivered, and walked to the front door to drop the heavy extra bar across it. Ammi shook no less, and had to tug and point for lack of controllable voice when he wished to draw notice to the growing luminosity of the trees. The neighing and stamping of the horses had become utterly frightful, but not a soul of that group in the old house would have ventured forth for any earthly reward. With the moments the shining of the trees increased, while their restless branches seemed to strain more and more toward verticality. The wood of the well-sweep was shining now, and presently a policeman dumbly pointed to some sodden sheds and bee-hives near the stone wall on the west. They were commencing to shine, too, though the tethered vehicles of the visitors seemed so far unaffected. Then there was a wild commotion and clopping in the road, and as Ammi quenched the lamp for better seeing they realized that the span of frantic grays had broken their sapling and run off with the democrat-wagon.

The shock served to loosen several tongues, and embarrassed whispers were exchanged. "It spreads on everything organic that's been around here," muttered the medical examiner. No one replied, but the man who had been in the well gave a hint that his pole must have

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stirred up something intangible. "It was awful," he added. "There was no bottom at all. Just ooze and bubbles and the feeling of something lurking under there." Ammi's horse still pawed and screamed deafeningly in the road outside, and nearly drowned its owner's faint quaver as he mumbled his formless reflections. "It come from that stone—it growed down thar—it got everything livin'—it fed itself on 'em, mind and body —Thad an' Mervin, Zenas an' Nabby—Nahum was the last—they all drunk the water—it got strong on 'em—it come from beyond, whar things ain't like they be here—now it's goin' home—"

At this point, as the column of unknown colour flared suddenly stronger and began to weave itself into fantastic suggestions of shape which each spectator later described differently, there came from poor tethered Hero such a sound as no man before or since ever heard from a horse. Every person in that low-pitched sitting room stopped his ears, and Ammi turned away from the window in horror and nausea. Words could not convey it—when Ammi looked out again the hapless beast lay huddled inert on the moonlit ground between the splintered shafts of the buggy. That was the last of Hero till they buried him next day. But the present was no time to mourn, for almost at this instant a detective silently called attention to something terrible in the very room with them. In the absence of the lamplight it was clear that a faint phosphorescence had begun to pervade the entire apartment. It glowed on the broad-planked floor and the fragment of rag carpet, and shimmered over the sashes of the small-paned windows. It ran up and down the exposed corner-posts, coruscated about the shelf and mantel, and infected the very doors and furniture. Each minute saw it strengthen, and at last it was very plain that healthy living things must leave that house.

Ammi showed them the back door and the path up through the fields to the ten-acre pasture. They walked and stumbled as in a dream, and did not dare look back till they were far away on the high ground. They were glad of the path, for they could not have gone the front way, by that well. It was bad enough passing the glowing barn and sheds, and those shining orchard trees with their gnarled, fiendish contours; but thank Heaven the branches did their worst twisting high up. The moon went under some very black clouds as they crossed the rustic bridge over Chapman's Brook, and it was blind groping from there to the open meadows.

When they looked back toward the valley and the distant Gardner place at the bottom they saw a fearsome sight. All the farm was shining with the hideous unknown blend of colour; trees, buildings, and even such grass and herbage as had not been wholly changed to lethal grey brittleness. The boughs were all straining skyward, tipped with tongues of foul flame, and lambent tricklings of the same monstrous fire were creeping about the ridgepoles of the house, barn and sheds. It was a scene from a vision of Fuseli, and over all the rest reigned that riot of luminous amorphousness, that alien and undimensioned rainbow of cryptic poison from the well—seething, feeling, lapping, reaching, scintillating, straining, and malignly bubbling in its cosmic and unrecognizable chromaticism.

Then without warning the hideous thing shot vertically up toward the sky like a rocket or meteor leaving behind no trail and disappearing through a round and curiously regular hole in the clouds before any man could gasp or cry out. No watcher can ever forget that sight and Ammi stared blankly at the stars of Cygnus, Deneb twinkling above the others, where the unknown colour had melted into the Milky Way. But his gaze was the next moment called swiftly to earth by the crackling in the valley. It was just that. Only a wooden ripping and crackling, and not an explosion, as so many others of the party vowed. Yet the outcome was the same, for in one feverish kaleidoscopic instant there burst up from that doomed and accursed farm

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a gleamingly eruptive cataclysm of unnatural sparks and substance; blurring the glance of the few who saw it, and sending forth to the zenith a bombarding cloudburst of such coloured and fantastic fragments as our universe must needs disown. Through quickly reclosing vapours they followed the great morbidity that had vanished, and in another second they had vanished too. Behind and below was only a darkness to which the men dared not return, and all about was a mounting wind which seemed to sweep down in black, frore gusts from interstellar space. It shrieked and howled, and lashed the fields and distorted woods in a mad cosmic frenzy, till soon the trembling party realized it would be no use waiting for the moon to show what was left down there at Nahum's.

TOO awed even to hint theories, the seven shaking men trudged back toward Arkham by the north road. Ammi was worse than his fellows, and begged them to see him inside his own kitchen, instead of keeping straight on to town. He did not wish to cross the blighted, wind-whipped woods alone to his home on the main road. For he had had an added shock that the others were spared, and was crushed forever with a brooding fear he dared not even mention for many years to come. As the rest of the watchers on that tempestuous hill had stolidly set their faces toward the road, Ammi had looked back an instant at the shadowed valley of desolation so lately sheltering his ill-starred friend. And from that stricken, far-away spot he had seen something feebly rise, only to sink down again upon the place from which the great shapeless horror had shot into the sky. It was just a colour—but not any colour of our earth or heavens. And because Ammi recognized that colour, and knew that this last faint remnant must still lurk down there in the well, he has never been quite right since.

Ammi would never go near the place again. It is forty-four years now since the horror happened, but he has never been there, and will be glad when the new reservoir blots it out. I shall be glad, too, for I do not like the way the sunlight changed colour around the mouth of that abandoned well I passed. I hope the water will always be very deep—but even so, I shall never drink it. I do not think I shall visit the Arkham country hereafter. Three of the men who had been with Ammi returned the next morning to see the ruins by daylight, but there were not any real ruins. Only the bricks of the chimney, the stones of the cellar, some mineral and metallic litter here and there, and the rim of that nefandous well. Save for Ammi's dead horse, which they towed away and buried, and the buggy which they shortly returned to him, everything that had ever been living had gone. Five eldritch acres of dusty gray desert remained, nor has anything ever grown there since. To this day it sprawls open to the sky like a great spot eaten by acid in the woods and fields, and the few who have ever dared glimpse it in spite of the rural tales have named it "the blasted heath."

The rural tales are queer. They might be even queerer if city men and college chemists could be interested enough to analyze the water from that disused well, or the gray dust that no wind seems to disperse. Botanists, too, ought to study the stunted flora on the borders of that spot, for they might shed light on the country notion that the blight is spreading—little by little, perhaps an inch a year. People say the colour of the neighboring herbage is not quite right in the spring, and that wild things leave queer prints in the light winter snow. Snow never seems quite so heavy on the blasted heath as it is elsewhere. Horses—the few that are left in this motor age—grow skittish in the silent valley; and hunters cannot depend on their dogs too near the splotch of grayish dust.

They say the mental influences are very bad, too; numbers went queer in the years after Nahum's taking, and always they lacked the power to get away. Then the stronger-minded folk all left the region, and only the foreigners tried

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to live in the crumbling old homesteads. They could not stay, though; and one sometimes wonders what insight beyond ours their wild, weird stories of whispered magic have given them. Their dreams at night, they protest, are very horrible in that grotesque country; and surely the very look of the dark realm is enough to stir a morbid fancy. No traveler has ever escaped a sense of strangeness in those deep ravines, and artists shiver as they paint thick woods whose mystery is as much of the spirits as of the eye. I myself am curious about the sensation I derived from my one lone walk before Ammi told me his tale. When twilight came I had vaguely wished some clouds would gather, for an odd timidity about the deep skyey voids above had crept into my soul.

Do not ask me for my opinion. I do not know—that is all. There was no one but Ammi to question; for Arkham people will not talk about the strange days, and all three professors who saw the aerolite and its coloured globule are dead. There were other globules—depend upon that. One must have fed itself and escaped, and probably there was another which was too late. No doubt it is still down the well—I know there was something wrong with the sunlight I saw above that miasmal brink. The rustics say the blight creeps an inch a year, so perhaps there is a kind of growth or nourishment even now. But whatever demon hatching is there, it must be tethered to something or else it would quickly spread. Is it fastened to the roots of those trees that claw the air? One of the current Arkham tales is about fat oaks that shine and move as they ought not to do at night.

What it is, only God knows. In terms of matter I suppose the thing Ammi described would be called a gas, but this gas obeyed the laws that are not of our cosmos. This was no fruit of such worlds and suns as shine on the telescopes and photographic plates of our observatories. This was no breath from the skies whose motions and dimensions our astronomers measure or deem too vast to measure. It was just a colour out of space—a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes.

I DOUBT very much if Ammi consciously lied to me, and I do not think his tale was all a freak of madness as the townsfolk had forewarned. Something terrible came to the hills and valleys on that meteor, and something terrible—though I know not in what proportion—still remains. I shall be glad to see the water come. Meanwhile I hope nothing will happen to Ammi. He saw so much of the thing—and its influence was so insidious. Why has he never been able to move away? How clearly he recalled those dying words of Nahum's—"can't git away—draws ye—ye know summ'at's comin' but tain't no use—" Ammi is such a good old man—when the reservoir gang gets to work I must write the chief engineer to keep a sharp watch on him. I would hate to think of him as the gray, twisted, brittle monstrosity which persists more and more in troubling my sleep.

For Howard Phillips Lovecraft

THE pathos of a great moth, beautiful,
Crushed by the world's fanatic cruelty,
Drawn ever onward by the mystical,
Eternal light of unknown fantasy.

—ROBERT W. LOWNDES

For information on the collected works of H. P. Lovecraft, see advertising pages

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A Princess of a fabulous race, she came to him

Out of the Desert

By L. PATRICK GREENE

ORDINARILY I shun the side shows that always may be found in close proximity to the Big Top whenever the circus comes to town. Last summer I broke my rule; one of the posters was responsible. Its garish colors offended the artistic eye, and the printed words it bore were an everready testimony that fiction is stranger than truth. It was the picture of a dwarf, purporting to be a bushman, in the act of swallowing a huge python which was curled around his body.

THE ONLY BUSHMAN IN CAPTIVITY

Brought to America at Enormous Expense
By the Famous Explorer, Captain Stanhope

THE RIDDLE OF THE AGES
Proclaimed by Famous Scientists to be

THE MISSING LINK
As shown Before all the Crowned Heads of Europe

I read with amused wonder—then gleefully marched up to the booth, paid my quarter, and entered the tent. I was convinced that I should see no bushman, for as a race the bushman is all but extinct, and surely no one could be successful in bringing one of the "little people" away from his haunts in Africa. Resolved, then, to have some fun at the expense of the pseudo bushman, I was glad to find, on entering the tent, that the rest of the spectators were grouped around the barker who was extolling the wonders of the Princess Radada, the far-famed snake-charmer.

The bushman was given the place of honor between Marvella, the Sword-Swallower, and Venus the Tattooed Lady. As I drew near to him I gave a little start of surprise. If he was a fake, then he was a very good one. Barely five feet in height he bore all the earmarks of the real bushman; the head covered with little knots of twisted hair somewhat longer than that of the negro; the discolored and pointed teeth; the thin, scraggly goatee beard on an otherwise smooth face; the lobeless ears. Last and most striking proof was the round, distended stomach, gray of color, which is always to be noticed on the true bushman. Certain tribes call them the "gray bellies."

Yet, despite all this I was not convinced, and drawing near I said to him abruptly, "Well, what do you get out of this faking?" He made no sign that he heard me. Then I addressed him in a sort of bastard Bechuana dialect used by certain bushmen who have for several generations been held as slaves by the Bechuanas. He looked up in interest at this, as one who hears something with which he is dimly familiar.

Then a sudden realization swept over me that here was no fake; and determined to find out who had charge of the bushman that I might have a talk with him, I turned round to find myself facing a man who carried me back to other days, and to another land.

"Why, hello, Armitage! What on earth are you doing here? The world is a small place after all."

"Hush. Captain Stanhope is my *nom de Circus*."

In further explanation he added, "I'm with the bushman. And I might ask what are *you* doing here? A lot of water has passed under the bridge since I stayed at your camp on the Zambezi."

"Can't you get away from here? I want to ask you a hundred questions."

"Wait a minute. It's time for me to deliver my spiel. I'll make it short."

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Mounting his stand he barked—that is the correct term—at the bushman, who immediately rose to his feet and uttered ear-piercing yells which had the effect of bringing the sightseers around his stand. Armitage spoke to the dwarf again and he was silent.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Armitage began, "you see before you the only bushman in captivity—"

As he spoke I pondered over the strangeness of this meeting, contrasting it with our other one on the banks of the mighty Zambezi. Armitage was a typical prospector, following the life for the fun of it, always waiving the cash in hand for the bare possibility of amassing enormous wealth by some lucky stroke.

One of the earliest of the Rhodesian pioneers, he had fought through the Matabele campaign and before that through the Zulu rebellion. Possessing no little book knowledge he was everywhere quoted as an authority on native customs and language, speaking fluently many dialects. To the natives he was a man set apart as one who knew all things.

Though he was nearly sixty years of age he looked still in the prime of life. He had that lean, wiry frame which never tires. His gray-flecked mustache, waxed at the ends, turned jauntily upward; his face, baked by the African sun, was of the color and consistency of leather. The gray eyes —steel-gray—overhung with thick, bushy eyebrows, were the eyes of one accustomed to peering over the limitless distances of the sun-scorched veldt.

A murmur of amazement brought my attention back to the immediate present.

"So, ladies and gentlemen," Armitage was saying, "if any of you wish to give the little bushman a treat come again tonight and bring a can of worms with you. They are his favorite food. He eats them alive. Now the little bushman cannot speak a word of English, but he will be glad to sell you photos of himself. The price is one dime. I thank you."

WHEN Armitage rejoined me we made our way to a near-by cafe and ordered dinner.

"Well, here's how," he said. "Um-m! That knocks Cape brandy into a cocked hat. Do you remember the last peg we had together? Dop, warm dop, diluted with warm, muddy water and the temperature one hundred and twenty degrees in the shade. But my, how we guzzled it down. That's Africa. How does that chap, Cullen Gouldsberry, put it?

'A book on cattle sickness and a cow,
A flask of dop, a tin of bully beef, and thou
Beside me swearing at the wilderness,
That is the real Rhodesia—here and now.'

"Yet I tell you, boy, it is God's own country just the same, and I'm going back there very soon."

"With the bushman?"

"H——, yes, of course. And curious to know all about him, aren't you?" he said, with a merry twinkle in his eye. "After I left you that day on the Zambezi, I went up into the Belgian Congo and made a lucky strike. Feeling a desire to get back to civilization, I sold my claim and went down to Johannesburg, determined to have a regular hot spree. However, I got in with a poker crowd and lost all my money the first night I reached the big city. They must have stacked the cards on me." He lapsed into mournful silence.

"Fill up," said I; "let's drink to the bushman."

"Ah, yes, the bushman. The next day I went to see Doc Johnson, one of the pioneers. I knew the doc would stake me. He did, and what was more, put me in the way of a little easy money—at least, so it seemed.

" 'You are just the man I have been looking for, Bill,' he said. 'One of my patients, a rich American, has commissioned me to find a man who will get a regular bushman for him. No Bechuana half-caste, you understand, but the real article. Says he wants to study their language, but isn't able to visit them in their own country. Do you want the job?'

" 'I'm game,' says I. 'When do I start?'

" 'Not so fast, Bill. Don't you want to know what price he's paying?'

"Well, it appeared that the professor was willing to pay one thousand pounds and

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expenses to the man that brings him a bushman. Doc advanced me five hundred pounds and I started without losing any time on the man-hunt. Making my way by easy stages—but not so damned easy at that, I arrived about a month later at Namies on the very edge of the great thirst land—the Kalahari Desert.

"At Namies I found a little colony of trek Boers and stayed with them until the grazing was no longer good and they struck camp and made for richer pastures. Among their servants I met an old hunting acquaintance named Hendricks. Hendricks was a half caste, half Hottentot, half bushman. I tried to persuade him to accompany me on my trip, but he shook his grizzled head vehemently.

" 'Ikona, Baas. No, there I will not go with you. It is the land of many evil things. Also I am under contract to the Baas du Toit.'

"Still Hendricks was able to give me a lot of useful information. Two days hard trekking from Namies, he said, was Gamoep and there I would find a permanent waterhole and a plentiful supply of fodder for such animals as I had with me. Hendricks advised me to stay there for two or three days and then striking southwest, three or possibly four days' trekking, with a waterhole on the second day, I would strike the 'thunder hills,' where he had been told there was always plenty of water and a small colony of bushmen had their camp. Hendricks also assured me that my knowledge of the bushman language was good.

"Well, I'll not admit myself second to any native when it comes to plain trekking on the veldt, but the desert stuff was new to me, and I'll tell you, boy, I felt some qualms of uneasiness when I bid the Boers good-by. They thought I was mad, and as I see it now I don't know that I blame them.

"My outfit consisted of two pack mules, each carrying a water-keg, and the rest of my stuff divided up between them. Blankets, flour, and—oh, you know the little a prospector can get along with. Give him water and he will exist. I rode a small Basuto pony, I called him Prince—you know the type, wiry and as hard as nails.

"The first day's trek was fairly easy, and I began to congratulate myself on having found a soft thing. I should have known better. The second day saw the start of my troubles. Hot? You have my word for it. At times I walked to give the horse a rest, and the sand, even through my heavy boots, seemed hot enough to roast a joint. It was light and powdery, so that my foot sank into it, ankle-deep, at every step.

"Night fell and I was still far from the water-hole that Hendricks had spoken of, but I could see in the near distance the lion-shaped ridge of rock which marked the pool. Darkness fell, but I trusted to the animals who were now thrusting forward at an ever-increasing pace toward water.

"In the final mad rush which I was powerless to stop, even had I tried, one of the water-kegs broke loose from its moorings and, falling on a rock, was staved in. That night I built a fire, not for warmth, but in protection from the scorpions and snakes. The fire attracted hundreds, it seemed, of tarantulas—red, hairy horrors of hell. Some were as large as field-mice and the only security from them was to perch on a small rock in the middle of the pool. Here I stayed in a cramped-up position until the night became too cold for them—the thermometer must have dropped to eighty degrees—and they returned to their lairs among the rocks.

"EARLY the next morning I had the good fortune to shoot a spring-buck not far from the water-hole—he was one of a big herd—and the rest of that day was occupied in preparing biltong.

"Four days I stayed at the water-hole, tortured by the tremendous heat in the day time and the red horrors at night; but there was water, some shade, and for the animals fairly good grazing. But, poor devils, except that they carried no load, it was almost as hard on them as trekking. All through the day they performed a sort of dance, lifting their feet constantly, attempting to cool them.

"On the fifth day I started out once more, and hard work it was to get the mules away from the water-hole; they seemed to know what fate had in store for

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them. The loss of the water-keg made it possible for me to give the mules a lighter load, but even so, I decided to cache some of my stuff lest they break down under the pack. I, too, hesitated about going on, for with only one water-keg I was taking a long chance—not allowing for any unlooked-for happenings.

"Soon after leaving the water-hole behind I struck the Kanya veldt, just as Hendricks had said. Kanya, you know, means 'round stone,' and here the desert was paved with stones measuring about six inches in diameter. They were packed so close together that they nearly touched, while about two-thirds of their bulk was buried in the sand. This made for slow traveling.

"Every step had to be carefully picked; a misstep would mean a sprained fetlock or ankle. And here, too, the heat seemed to be greater than ever. We pushed right on, though, and far into the night, taking my bearing by the stars. Now and again I would halt to take a miserly swig of water and pull up some plants, growing between the stones, resembling a turnip, which I fed to the animals. The roots must have contained much water, for the beasts enjoyed them. I tasted them, but the flavor was sickly and unpalatable.

"By noon of the following day a heavy breeze sprang up and the air was filled with fine particles of sand, making breathing a torture. Sand spouts appeared here and there and the desert sounded its sullen note of warning—the low drone that presages a sand-storm. In feverish haste I made Prince lie down, and after hobbling the mules, threw them.

"Then I crouched down beside Prince, whose head I had covered with a blanket. The drone increased in volume, the sand spouts merged into one enormous funnel; with a shriek the desert monster was upon us. Several hours later the storm suddenly ceased. Shaking off the thick blanket of sand which covered me, I helped Prince to his feet, and then went to the mules. They were completely covered, but apparently suffered no ill effects.

"Pressing on at a good rate, for by this we had left the 'tunya veldt' behind us, we reached the second water-hole about four in the afternoon. Then it seemed that the desert was indeed fighting in protection of its people. The water-hole was dried up! At first I could not believe my eyes, and thought perhaps the sand storm had covered it up.

"I dug frantically therefore at a depression between the rocks where I judged the water had been. When I unearthed the skeleton of a human being, I gave up hope. My water-keg was almost empty, perhaps a pint left, for I had been very prodigal of my supply after the storm, sharing it with the animals. I was so secure in my knowledge that we were near water. It never occurred to me that it would be dried up. Two courses were now open to me: to return to certain water at Gamoep, provided I could live to reach it; to go forward and tempt fate. Two days' trek to a certainty, one forward to the unknown.

"In the distance I could see the hills that promised water, 'only a day's trek,' I thought; 'I can make it by sundown tomorrow,' and went forward. Another night on the hot sand, and on our way again in the early morning. What little food I tried to take all but choked me. My water was completely gone, and, well—a few hours would tell. The sun beat on my spine with ever-increasing heat and it seemed as though a thousand red-hot needles were sticking into it. My eyeballs ached, and my tongue was like a piece of blotting-paper. I bit my lips, but no blood flowed. I put a pebble into my mouth, hoping that would cause the saliva to flow, but it was red-hot, and I hastily let it drop out.

"The mountains were getting nearer, and when they seemed barely a mile away I had reached the limit of human endurance. Putting my spurs into Prince I urged him to a gallop. Poor beast, it was hard on him, but he responded. Then he suddenly floundered and fell, pitching me on my head; for a while I remembered no more.

"I was a boy once more, walking through grassy meadows on my way to the swimming-pool. Quickly I undressed and stood poised for a moment on the bank. Then I dived, and in some miraculous manner the

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pool dried up and I hit my head on a rock.

"Coming to with a start I was conscious that some one was bathing my face and lips with water. I opened my mouth and several drops trickled in and was painfully swallowed. Slowly opening my eyes, half fearing that this, too, was a dream, I saw a bushman sitting beside me, a gourd of water in his hand. I tried to speak, but my tongue refused to articulate. Then I tried to take the gourd from him, but he shook his head.

" 'A little ye may drink as I give it thee.' So he gave it to me drop by drop. My brain cleared, and my tongue softened.

" 'Whence come ye?' I asked.

" 'That ye shall see later. Art able to ride now?' "

"I nodded.

" 'Then follow me.'

"LUCKILY Prince had not suffered any harm from the fall, and after mounting him with difficulty I followed my mysterious rescuer.

"Arrived at the foot of the hills we made our way along their base until we came to a cleft. This we entered and I perceived we were in a narrow gorge. Down this we went for about a mile. It suddenly opened into a sort of amphitheater, and there before us was a large pool surrounded by almost tropical foliage. The mules who had bolted ahead were already wallowing in it, and Prince, taking the bit between his teeth, bolted after them with me on his back. When he reached the water I slid off him and lay in the pool absorbing moisture through every pore of my body. I remember hearing the bushman yell to me not to drink the water, then once more the light went out.

"I was sick, they tell me, for three months, a sort of brain fever, I take it. I have no recollections of my sickness, nothing definite at any rate. I had some lucid moments, of course, but was never strong enough to ponder too deeply into matters. I seemed dimly aware on one or two occasions that a woman was standing beside me—a white woman.

"It could have been only a dream I thought; yet when the day came that I was able to converse with my bushman attendants—it appeared that two had been appointed to guard and care for me—I asked for the 'white woman.' Instead of answering my question they looked strangely at each other.

" 'Of a certainty this is the man, the Son of the Wind,' said one.

" 'Yea, brother, it is even so; for look, he asks for the Woman of the Moon.'

" 'What talk is all this of spirits?' said I. 'Tell the white woman I would have speech with her.'

" 'Nay, stranger. That time has not yet come. First thou must regain thy strength, then shall ye have all things made known to thee.'

"From that day started the long and weary process of building up my wasted strength. And yet it was not without its compensations, for I was able to learn a great deal about the 'little people,' and there was much of interest in my immediate surroundings. The cave in which I lived was large and cool, always cool, even in the day time. Its walls were covered with wonderful bushman paintings—paintings that far excelled any I had previously seen.

"There was a greater variety of objects depicted, and what was most amazing was the fact that many of the pictures of human beings wore a sort of robe and had long, flowing hair. From my attendants, who were named Cagn and Cogas, I learned that there were over two hundred people in the colony, all of whom lived in caves, similar to mine, hewn out of the solid rock.

"This tribe was known as the 'people of the moon,' and considered themselves far superior to the veldt bushmen, as indeed they were. They looked on me, I gathered, as a spirit whose advent meant great prosperity. More they would not tell me, and though I pondered often on the matter I could not solve the riddle. There were many things I could not do. I was not allowed to leave my cave, for instance, after sundown, or go into any other cave at any time; neither could I hold speech with the other inhabitants of the colony. Indeed that was an impossibility. My approach was the signal for all to disappear.

"Food was plentiful of a sort, a kind of

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coarse meal with wild honey, and occasionally some venison. Wherever I went, Cagn and Cogas were in close attendance. (Me they called Na-ka-ti!) Evidently I was a prisoner, though they need have had no fear that I would attempt to escape. For the time I had had my fill of the desert.

"There came a day when I was allowed to go out of the gorge with a hunting party. A herd of zebra was in the vicinity, and the 'little people' were planning on a big kill. It felt good to get onto Prince's back, my rifle slung across my back.

"As we emerged from the gorge, Cagn and Cogas in close attention, I saw several bushmen, each enclosed in a sort of framework covered with the skin and feathers of an ostrich. I had heard of this manner of stalking game and was excited at the prospect of witnessing such a hunt. For two or three hours we trekked, the disguised bushmen strutting on in front of me, imitating, to the life, the peculiar gait of the ostrich. Finally we made a shelter from the rays of the sun in the side of the sand-dune. Here we waited patiently.

"The hunters strutted up and down evidently having the time of their lives. Other bushmen, Cagn told me, had gone to drive the zebra toward us. It was their business to allow the zebra to get their scent gradually, so as not to stampede them, and force them our way. The sun was in its zenith when Cagn said:

" 'Zebra come.'

"He was disgusted, I think, that I could not see them. As a matter of fact, it was fully half an hour after he spoke that I caught my first glimpse of them. It was a small herd, about twenty of them, and they were coming at an easy pace in the direction of the disguised bushmen. When the zebra were within fifty feet of them they hesitated—perhaps they caught our scent; then seeing the supposed ostriches they apparently came to the conclusion that there was nothing to fear and slowly advanced.

"The hunters remained motionless until the zebra were a bare arm's length from them. Then four bow-cords twanged and four zebras fell to the ground. The rest stampeded, but not before I got in two shots, the second killing a zebra. The first I missed because the cartridge had been for a long time in the hot chamber of the rifle, and the powder had become too lively. Though I was disgusted at my failure to make such an easy shot as it was, I soon discovered that I had caused a great sensation. All of the bushmen were down on their knees before me, terrified.

"That night was a time of great merriment, feasting, dancing, and the drinking of fermented honey. My praises, and the wonders of the 'stick that spits out fire' were sung aloud. I was treated with an even greater respect than usual, and my attendants told me that on the morrow I would see the Moon Woman.

"NEXT day I was ready for anything, but yet not ready for what happened. It was nearly sundown when Cagn came to me bidding me get ready. It did not take long to spruce up. A dip in the pool—that was all there was to it. Then Cagn and Cogas escorted me to the entrance of a large cave, which was in the center of the amphitheater. All of the little people were there, though they kept at a respectful distance from me. And soon Cagn and Cogas, after bidding me remain where I was, joined their fellows.

"I was conscious that they were waiting for the sun to set, and I not knowing what would happen then took stock of my surroundings, seeking an avenue of escape, should evil come my way. But there was no way out. Many conjectures passed through my head. The one that persisted with great frequency was that these people were given to devil worship and that I was to be the sacrifice.

"I noticed that a curtain of cloth covered the entrance to the cave before which I stood. That in itself was astounding—for the bushman is the most primitive of all people, and has no knowledge of making cloth—and when a closer scrutiny revealed that pictures of gold had been woven into it I was dumbfounded. Whence came this?

"The sun was setting. A shout went up from a watcher perched on the top of the gorge that the sun had sunk behind the horizon; and at that moment the people

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began to sing a low-throbbing chant:

" 'O lady of the night, come forth.
Our tongues are parched; the land is dry.
Behold, Na-ka-ti, Son of the Wind.
Come forth and greet thy spouse
That from thee may spring the rains that soothe and recreate.'

From the cave a voice replied:
'I come, ye people.' "

"Behind me I heard the noise of running feet, and turning beheld the little people running to their caves. A half thought came to me to join them, but the desire to see the thing through was strong, and I turned once again and faced the cave.

"The curtains were parted and there stepped out on the narrow platform a woman—it was the woman of my dreams. But now I saw that she was not white, but of a light copper tint. Of the characteristics of the bush people she had none. She was tall and slender, her nose slightly curved, the lips perfectly formed.

"I can best describe her to you by saying that she looked like an Egyptian princess. Yes, that's it, Egyptian. She wore a long, flowing robe, once white, discolored and worn with the age of centuries. A girdle of gold was about her waist, and she wore bracelets on her arms of the same metal. And there she stood with arms outstretched as if I were a long-lost brother. As for me, I bade her 'good afternoon' in English, and stood there grinning like a fool. She answered in the bushman dialect.

" 'Greetings, O my spouse to be. I have waited long for thee.'

" 'What mean these words? And who are ye?'

" 'What, dost not know? Enter and rest.'

"I followed her into the cave, which was about twice the size of mine. Her bed I noticed was cut out of the rock about three feet from the floor. And there were many strange ornaments that reminded me of some Egyptian pottery I had seen in a museum. This is what she told me, but not connectedly as I am telling you:

" 'Long, long ago, the desert was once a fertile valley and our people, yours and mine, for we were as one, were numerous and happy. Everywhere could be heard the song of birds and running water, and the sound of happiness filled the land. To this land came two white ones—man and woman—who were spirits. My people named them Son of the Wind, and Moon Woman.

" 'Long they dwelt in the land, and in all things the people obeyed them. This place, even here, was the place of their abode, here they dwelt, they and their children. Moshesh, a chief of the people, cast evil eyes on the spouse of the Son of the Wind, and by his craft killed the Son of the Wind, whose spirit called out as it left his body:

I go in the wind, and evil shall befall this people. But I will come again in a like manner, then shall ye, O Moshesh, feel my vengeance.

" 'On that day a mighty wind sprang up laden with sand from the great desert that is to the north. Many moons the wind blew carrying the sand, so that the rivers were filled up and many people died of the thirst. The spirits of evil walked hand-in-hand with the storm. Moshesh with the Moon Woman remained in this place, and many of the people also took refuge in the valley. When the Moon Woman died she, too, made a prophecy:

" '*I shall come yet again to thee, my people, and wait for my spouse, the Son of the Wind. For three years will I wait for him after I have reached the age of marrying, then if he comes not I will wed one of the people, that in dying I may be born yet again.*

" 'Many times have I returned to wait for thee, O Nak-ka-ti! But now thou art here, and the time of thirst is at an end.'

"Many other things concerning the tradition the Moon Woman told me, speaking with a kind of childish dignity. I learned that Moshesh had been turned out of the tribe after the death of the Moon Woman, and that he had been their bitter enemy ever since.

"When I returned to my cave my brain reeled at the things I had heard. And yet she had made much clear to me. It explained why I had been so well taken care of instead of being left to die on the desert. As to her story I tried to explain it this way. This woman was evidently a throwback to some degenerate white man, or per-

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haps her ancestry could be traced back to an Egyptian noble. Or perhaps a priest of Isis, false to his vows, fleeing with his love from the wrath of the high priests, had been captured by a band of bushmen. The rest, the prophecy and so forth, had been handed down the ages, each generation adding something, until it had become a tradition. Oh, I know it's a far-fetched explanation —but have you a better?

"IN THE morning Cagn and Cogas brought me a long robe similar to the one worn by the princess and bade me put it on.

" 'This, lord,' said they, 'is the robe of thy betrothal. Tell us when thou wilt take her to thy cave, that we may tell it to the people.'

"You know, boy, that I have always had nothing but contempt for the man that goes 'black,' and it was far from my intention to enter into any sort of marriage contract with the princess. In spite of the fact that she herself had none of the earmarks of the little people, I knew that her father and mother were bush people, and that she herself was a bushwoman in everything but appearance.

"Blood, customs, mentality, it was all native, and the lowest order of humanity. Death would be preferable. Even if I did marry her it is quite sure that the rest of the prophecy would not have been fulfilled. And then what would happen? A slow death by torture for failing to turn the wilderness into a bloomin' paradise!

"Still I was in no hurry to rush matters. It's been my experience that given time, the unexpected always happens. So with this in mind, and at the same time seeking to act in character with my supposed godship, I replied:

" 'On the night of the full moon, tell the people, Na-ka-ti, the Son of the Wind, will take his spouse.'

"I watched them closely as they pondered over my reply, and heaved a sigh of relief when they threw themselves at my feet, saying:

" 'Give us leave to depart, O Great One, that preparations may be made for the feast.'

"Rising to their feet they ran down the gorge, calling out gleefully:

" 'The Son of the Wind hath spoken. On the night of the full moon the prophecy will be fulfilled and we shall be once more a great people and this land shall be fruitful.'

"As for me I determined to enjoy myself as best I could in the twenty days left me. Every day I spent hunting with the men folk out on the desert. Game was plentiful; this the little people attributed to my presence. Though I had nothing but admiration for the bushmen as hunters and for their intimate knowledge of nature, yet they disgusted me in many ways.

"They were but little removed from the beasts. And the princess, despite her superior appearance, was no better than the rest. One day we killed several large buck near the gorge and the whole colony came out and camped near the carcasses, and feasted. They ate the meat practically raw. I noticed that they left nothing for the jackals. The parts that we throw away as unclean were looked upon as a great delicacy and given to the princess. She greedily devoured it, all unwashed, as it was, and nearly raw! This and the sight of her eating a very ancient ostrich-egg doubled my determination to die rather than marry her. I could picture myself sinking to her level; it would have been impossible to raise her to mine.

"Although the nights were spent in alternate gorging, sleeping, and dancing a close guard was kept on the entrance to the gorge. When I questioned Cagn about this he told me that there was another tribe of bushmen, enemies of the moon people, who lived on the opposite side of the hills. They were under the leadership of Moshesh, the crafty one, a descendant, the Moon Woman told me, of that other Moshesh! Several times Moshesh had endeavored to raid the gorge, and it was to prevent a surprise attack that the guards were posted.

"It wanted, I think, about four days to the full moon. The feast had been conducted with an even wilder abandon than usual. The wild cries of the dancers vetoed all thoughts of sleep. After a time they, too, completely exhausted by their revels,

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retired to the caves and all was quiet, and then I slept.

"I was awakened by the noise of wailing women, and the shouts of enraged men. Taking up my rifle and cartridge-belt I went outside the cave. Cagn was running toward me, bow and arrows in hand.

" 'What is the matter, Cagn?' I said.

" 'Moshesh and his people are attacking us, O Son of the Wind. By craft he overcame the guard at the entrance to the gorge, and now he and all his people are inside—killing. Help us, for they are many!'

"Taking shelter behind a rock, for I did not wish to exhibit myself to the poisoned arrows of the invaders, I called out, 'O ye people of the moon, hasten to thy caves and there remain until the morning. I, and the "stick of thunder," will settle with these evil ones.'

"From below came the cry, 'We hear, and we obey, O Great One.'

"Other voices mocked them. 'Yea, ye moon people, remain in thy caves like jackals. In the morning we will smoke thee out and kill thee. Thy women shall be our slaves.'

"Then there was silence, but I could see my friends hastening to their caves, and the invaders, evidently well content, seated themselves round the fires and began to make merry.

"Giving the moon people plenty of time to get to their caves before starting to open fire, and also waiting until the moon got a little higher, I found myself wondering if the princess were safe. As though in answer to my thought, I heard her say:

" 'I am here, lord. Cogas brought me.'

"She looked very desirable there in the moonlight. I was all but carried away with the glamour, and I found myself thinking that, after all, she was much more to be desired than death. Oh, that blasted African moon! However, it was now directly overhead, and the raiders were below, a present peril to be reckoned with. Then my rifle spoke. It was slaughter, I know, but there was no other way.

"Six men toppled over before the rest realized what was happening. Then they scattered in all directions, some of them getting close to the rocks below us, where I could not reach them without exposing myself to their arrows. One of them, Moshesh the chief, made his way up the cliff face and onto the ledge. A cry from Cagn told me of the danger. 'It is Moshesh, the crafty one!' Covering him, I said, hoping to end the slaughter:

" 'See, O Moshesh, thy life is in my hands. Wilt thou give thyself up to me?'

" 'Nay, thou are in error,' he sneered; 'thy life is in my hands, and now I take it.' As he spoke he loosed the arrow from his bow. The princess threw herself before me and then collapsed. That same moment Moshesh dropped with a bullet through his heart.

"Picking the princess up in my arms I saw that the arrow was sticking in her cheek. The wound in itself was nothing, a mere scratch, but so powerful was the poison that she was already beyond help. She opened her eyes and smiled at me.

" 'I go from thee this time, my lord. But I will come again. Thou—thou wilt wait for me?'

"I nodded. Could I have done less?

"AT daybreak the survivors of the people of Moshesh were rounded up, and at my orders were admitted into the tribe of the moon people.

"We buried the princess, the Moon Woman, in a shallow grave at the entrance to the gorge—her face to the rising sun. Several of the tribe that had been killed during the night's fight were buried near her, that their spirits might keep guard over hers. The tribe, I among them, filed slowly by the grave, each dropping a large stone on it, chanting the while:

" *'Remember us from the place where you are, thou hast gone to a high abode. Cause us to prosper.'*

"When it was all over I made a big speech to the people, reminding them of the prophecy and of the event which had led up to the death of the Moon Woman.

" 'Therefore, O ye people,' I concluded, 'I may stay no more in this place. The Spirit of the Moon has gone and I also must leave thee. But I will come again. Cagn and Cogas shall come with me. They, too, shall return after a little while, having

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learned great wisdom.' It was a bold move, but to my surprise it worked.

"There is no need to tell you how I crossed the desert again, this time with Cagn and Cogas, save this perhaps. When we reached the dried-up water-hole Cagn began to dig deep down into the sand. In answer to my remark that there was no water there, and that we had better return to the gorge, he said:

" 'Wait, O great one, have patience.' Soon he came to a large, flat rock, which he told me to examine closely. I did so and noticed that it had a hole in it which had been plugged. Cagn knocked the plug out and a stream of water flowed from the hole. On another occasion when we halted for a rest after a long, dry stretch, Cagn again dug into the sand and brought to light some eleven or twelve ostrich egg-shells filled with water.

"When we came in sight of Namies, Cogas refused to go any further. He took alarm at the canvas-topped wagons of the trek Boers, who had returned to their old grazing grounds. Said that they were surely inhabited by evil spirits. Cagn, too, wanted to return, but I won him over by promising to teach him how to use a rifle. So I bade 'good-by' to Cogas, making him very happy by giving him a hunting-knife.

"We stayed a week or so with the trek Boers at Namies and then made our way to Johannesburg. I leave you to imagine what a time I had with Cagn. Several times he got me in wrong with the authorities, and I had to watch him very closely. When I tell you that I was forced to travel in the native coach with him, you will understand how I was treated by the officials—at least, those who didn't know me.

"Arriving at Johannesburg, I went at once to see doc.

" 'Why, Bill,' he said, 'we had given you up for lost. The professor got tired of waiting for you. Said that you were dead, or else a fraud and had never intended going after a bushman. I had some words with him about that. He was very ill. He returned to America last month.'

"Well, I got the professor's address and borrowed enough money from doc to bring me over here. You see, I wanted to fulfill my contract and I had a good use for the five thousand dollars.

"Of the trip over—we came over in a wind-jammer, and you can take it from me that I wished myself back in the desert many times. As for Cagn—

"When we reached New York I left Cagn in charge of the mate and went to the address that doc had given me, only to find that the professor had died soon after reaching America. And my troubles started all over again.

"Cagn escaped from the mate, and I lost him for two days.

"Then I saw his picture in the paper and a paragraph to the effect that he had been arrested for stealing a leg of lamb from a store! Of course I hot-footed it down to the police-station and explained matters. But do you think they believed me? Thought it was some new publicity stunt. However, they released Cagn, and we sought lodgings.

"Every hand seemed against us. Cagn's idiosyncracies were too much for the lodging-house keepers. Sometime I'll tell you of my adventures with Cagn in New York.

"Well, there came a time when my money was all but exhausted. I couldn't get a job because it was impossible to leave Cagn. In a fit of desperation I offered him to the Zoo people as a specimen of the missing link. You would have thought that they would have jumped at the chance. Instead they tried to have me arrested for trying to get money on false pretences!

"The publicity I got out of this brought me to the attention of the agent of this circus, and he made me an offer, which I accepted. It's a rotten life, but Cagn enjoys it, and I'm making money. Soon I'll have five thousand dollars, and expenses, salted away. Then we return—

"Man! Is it so late? I've got to get back. Are you coming with me?"

"You've said it, Bill. All the way if you'll have me."

Coming in the December Issue of this magazine on sale Oct. 10 "The Afterglow" A great novel by George Allan England.

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The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, 280 Broadway, New York City.

FINLAY PORTFOLIO OKAY

Recently I came into possession of one of the portfolios of reproductions of Virgil Finlay's illustrations which have appeared in FFM and FN recently. May I say that I consider this one of the best ideas and most appreciated services that any magazine has yet extended to its readers—short of publishing the magazine itself?

The Finlays are intrinsically most beautiful; and the reproducing process has in no way diminished that beauty. . . . While on the subject, I should like to remark that in my opinion some of the illustrations chosen were not the best from the stories involved (for instance, I should have selected the picture of the stone in the ring from "The Blind Spot")—but of course, it is manifestly impossible to please everybody.

In closing, I should like to inquire if there is any chance of another such portfolio, with a different set of illustrations, being made available in the future.

CHAS. H. CHANDLER.
82 E. LANE AVE.,
COLUMBUS, OHIO.

Editor's Note:
A second portfolio is being planned. We have a good supply of the first group arranged for.

FANDOM IN MICHIGAN

Have been waiting word that the Finlay pictures were ready before sending in my subscription (have bought all the previous issues from the newsstands.) Enclosed, therefore, is one dollar, for my year's sub and the folio of Finlay reproductions. Just read about the matter in Julius Unger's "FANTASY FICTION FIELD," which I get each week.

You have been doing a marvelous job of giving us reprints of the great stories of the past in FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION, and, I wish you all success in the future.

We fans in Southern Michigan have recently formed "The Galactic Roamers," a fan club with members so far in both Jackson and Battle Creek, including Doc "Lensman" Smith and his daughter. We have twelve members at present, and more coming in all the time. We are about to start a correspondence with all known Michigan Fans in the formation of a statewide Federation to be known as "The Michigans," under the sponsorship of our "Galactic Roamers" and "The Detroit Science Fictioneers." We have great hopes of being able to do real things in fandom.

May I express my personal appreciation for the grand job you are doing with FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES?

E. EVERETT EVANS.
191 CAPITAL AVE., S. W.,
BATTLE CREEK, MICH.

ENGLAND IN MARCH

Your last letter reached me late in December and I am pleased to say that at long last my copies of FAMOUS FANTASTIC succeeded in cocking a snook at submarines and arriving safe at my new address. My feelings upon receiving these beautiful books in one big consignment can scarcely be described. To date I have received them all up to the April issue and all I need now is more time to read them, though with the situation as it is now I am managing well enough.

Everyone around me has been cheered to see my last two letters in your pages, chiefly because they agree with me that our American friends should hear more of the old bulldog and "By Jingo!" spirit that inspires so many of us in the land of hope and glory. The world situation has changed radically, and as I expected it would, since I wrote you last way back in the blitz days of November. By now the blitz is on the other foot, and by Heavens, is it kicking! If American folk still think of us as brave people just stolidly taking our punishment, I beg of them to try and forget it. Think of us rather "as a great people standing upright and fighting for its life," a people with blood in its eye and vengeance in its heart, who are besieging a continent and will lay it in ruins before they will see it riven forever in chains.

It is so long since I have exercised a reader's right to talk about the stories he's read. The most fascinating feature I've read recently, however, is an article—Phil Richards' appraisal in F.F.M. of Flint and Hall, who are far and away my favorite authors, men whom I seem to feel are brother spirits—restless, roving, energetic intellects with voracious appetites for the real marvels of existence and a terrific sense of its drama. Theirs is the perfect combination of marvel and realism that makes me feel, when I read such tales as "Almost Immortal," "The Nth Man," "The Blind Spot," that Creation itself has been conjured up before my incredulous eyes.

I read "The Spot of Life" when it first appeared in 1932 and was annoyed to see it go practically ignored—fellow-fans were preoccupied with interplanetary stuff at the time—so I was more than pleased to see the terrific

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reception it got this time. It deserved it, too. What the world lost in "The Hidden Empire" and the rest of those unwritten masterpieces cannot be guessed at. I've been disappointed at the paucity of Flint stories in F.F.M.—only "Lord of Death" and half "The Blind Spot," but with the end of Hall's repertoire (and I'm afire with impatience for "Into the Infinite"), I expect you will be giving us "The Planeteer" and the rest of his masterpieces—for after three of Flint's that I've read, I can believe he wrote nothing but masterpieces.

If you haven't already decided, please accept my vote for a special issue of "The Moon Pool".

Philip M. Fisher's "Fungus Isle" made a brilliant contrast to "Face in the Abyss" in the same issue. The atmosphere of this tale is just how I like it, so real and convincing that I feel my hair stand on end. Complete with a skillful and unobtrusive plot, it is a perfect gem of science-fiction. Putting these two tales together was first rate editorial strategy.

"Claimed" is fantastic; in an atmosphere of conviction we must swallow the idea of a god from the sea. But it is a highly original story, and finely told. I read it at one sitting. The Golden Atom stories and Ralph Milne Farley's Radio Trilogy await my attention. I never completed "The Radio Man," and now you've run out of back issues I'm in danger of losing it altogether. Can any fellow-readers help? I need the issues of January and February 1940, and I'm willing to offer quadruple prices as a bribe, if it's okay by the Editor.

The Science-fiction Association no longer cares a cuss for the blitz and three meetings have been held in London in the last two months. Nearly a dozen members appeared last time and Private Sid Birchby has introduced us to a Services hall in the West End of London and the meets have been as enjoyable as those in the old days only eighteen months ago.

My best wishes, please, to all fans in America, especially to those of Colchester, Conn., who are doing good-neighbor work with my family's home-town in Essex; also those of other Essex towns, Maldon, Conn., and Braintree, Mass.; to those also of any town in the U. S. called Watford, if there is one. My best thanks to American correspondents who have already contacted me, and I promise to write them all as fast as I can, though they will surely understand if my replies don't come back at express speed. I will try to let you have more news from over here at quicker intervals in the near future.

FRANK EDWARD ARNOLD,
SCIENCE-FICTION ASSOCIATION
24 MAYTHORNE CLOSE,
WATFORD, HERTFORDSHIRE,
ENGLAND.
(formerly 1 Smith St.)

REPORT ON "OBLIVION"

I've been an admirer of F.F.M., which I believe to be the best one of them all. I have just finished reading "Beyond the Great Oblivion," which is the best fantastic story I've read. Oh, yes, I've read "Darkness and Dawn" When is the sequel "Afterglow" going to be printed? I'm anxious to read it.

How about making F.F.M. a monthly?

I'm an instructor of A. M. in the U. S. Air corps.

FERDINAND M. KIEHL.
Thirty-fifth Sch. Sqdn.,
Chanute Field,
Illinois.

Editor's Note: "The Afterglow" will be in the next issue.

JUNE ISSUE GREAT

The June F.F.M. featuring England's "Beyond the Great Oblivion" again showed that Finlay is top artist in the fantasy field and that the magazine's wealth of reprints can very rarely be equaled by modern writers, leaving F.F.M. on top nearly every month.

The cover reminded me of the one Finlay did for "Darkness and Dawn" and is as good. Count on me to buy any Finlay reproductions you might put out.

Now you just can't go on as you are giving only six issues a year. Either give us a monthly or double the size of each issue and charge double. Some magazines come out monthly and hardly have even one really great yarn a year and still get along Okay. So you with your wealth of reprints just waiting to be printed have every reason to go monthly.

DAN WADE.
Battery E,
Schofield Barracks,
Terr. of Hawaii.

WANTS BACK NUMBERS

Having begun to read your magazine just recently, I haven't a complete file. Since you seem unable to furnish these following copies for me, I would appreciate it very much if you could print a request in your readers' column, so that I could purchase them through readers. The magazines are: F. Fantastic Mysteries, Sept.-Oct. 1939, Nov. 1939, Dec. 1939, and Jan. 1940.

MYRON HOROWITZ.
240 E. 9th St.,
Traverse City,
Mich.

ON BURROUGHS AND KLINE

The last issue of FANTASTIC NOVELS containing A. Merritt's "Dwellers in the Mirage" is a classic. The ending, too, was a great improvement over the book ending, wherein Evalie survived and went forth with Lief into the outer world.

Your artists, Hannes Bok, Virgil Finlay and Frank R. Paul are the three masters of science and fantasy art. The Finlay reproductions is an excellent idea, but don't leave Bok out!

There has been some controversy pertaining to the reprinting of Burroughs' stories in FANTASTICS. I for one say yes. The ones that are out of print of course.

One reader in the last issue of F.F.M. mentioned reprinting Burroughs' "A Man Without a Soul" and "The Lad and the Lion." For the reader's information the former story was first

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published in All-Story Magazine, November, 1913, and was published in book form under the title, "The Monster Men" in 1929. "The Lad and the Lion" was first published in A. S. Cavalier June 30-July 14, 1917, and printed in book form, 1938.

Another favorite whom I have always liked is Otis A. Kline. His masterpieces are, "The Planet of Peril," "Prince of Peril," "Swordman of Mars," all of which I would like to see reprinted in time.

Last but not least, to all fans and prospective fans, we still have a few copies of The Achemist, Nos. 4 and 5, available to those who want them. Send 10c to Lew Martin, 1258 Race St., Denver, Colo.

Yours for a monthly publication, if not oftener.

Roy Hunt.

Colorado Fantasy Society
1258 Race St.,
Denver, Colo.

MINNEAPOLIS NEWS

It's been quite some time since I commented on F.F.M. last. Naturally "Beyond the Great Oblivion" is splendid; better than "Darkness and Dawn." It is almost comparable to Merritt, if that is possible.

Some readers of F.F.M. would perhaps care to know that The Fantasite, a new but popular fan magazine, is in the mails on bi-monthly schedule, and is chock full of interesting material for science-fantasy enthusiasts. It is in a new, attractively mimeographed format, in various colors, and features, articles, humor, departments, poetry and art work by prominent fans and authors; thirty pages or over. It is the official organ of the Minneapolis Fantasy Society, of which it has the full support. The price is only ten cents per copy. I urge all interested fans to try a copy and assure them good reading!

Fantastically,
Phil Bronson.
Editor: The Fantasite.

224 W. 6th St.,
Hastings, Minn.

ON "THE METAL MONSTER"

I have seen many drawings and paintings, but Finlay's are the most beautiful yet and I think they go wonderfully well with Merritt's tales. Speaking of Merritt, his stories are the only ones that have ever hit any responsive chord inside me. When he describes a beautiful girl or a scene, I can picture it just as it is described. I wish I knew where he draws his supply of beautiful words and lines so I could use them too. I just finished "The Metal Monster" and I think it is the most soul stirring, weirdly beautiful story yet, even though it is hard to put any of his stories above one or the other. Well, that's all this time, except I think with many others that two months is too long between issues and put in my vote for a monthly publication.

Allan Raether.

854 Wilson St.
Manitowoc, Wis.

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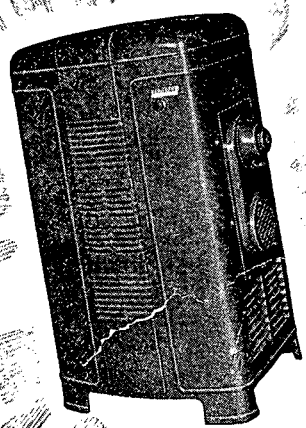

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